

REFORM AND RESISTANCE IN AMERICAN LITERATURE

By

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Reforms become oppressive when their power relationships cease to be reversibly relational and instead become blocked or frozen. I turn to narratives that appeared when these reforms were still new and fluid to find, through close readings, resistances that can be reworked to acquire meaning in present struggles. For example, Alcoholics Anonymous-style treatment programs urge members to subordinate themselves to higher powers by having them create narratives that decontextualize illicit behaviors from political activism and social problems. Whitman's *Franklin Evans* suggests that instead of making people conform to this temperance narrative, we all should be asking, "How many stories and styles of producing stories can we generate as strategic responses to the failure of the social order ever to achieve closure?"

Addressing such a question, *Moby-Dick* urges us to abandon our reliance on inner-selves and unmodifiable law in order to engage constantly in remaking the present in such a way that reminds others about that from which we are forever barred. This ethic is further explored in Nella Larsen's *Passing*, which responds to post-Reconstruction reform movements, particularly the fantasy that if everyone could be made to stay in his or her

"proper" place, all domestic problems would be solved. In the push-and-pull encounters between the two main characters, Larsen's novel provides a model of friendship that could usefully respond to today's dangerous appeals to the "safety" of idealized domesticity and "secure" identities.

How these ethical responses can contribute to collective counter-formations is addressed by my readings of Fannie Flagg's *Fried Green Tomatoes at the Whistle Stop Cafe*. This novel shows how storytelling, especially the exchange of anecdotes, motivates both individual and social change. Evelyn's Reaganite use of nostalgic storytelling is countered by the omniscient narrator, who shows how Idgie and her friends create a counterculture. By bringing together subjects from a plurality of social fields to exchange anecdotes, the Dill Pickle Club creates opportunities to destabilize identities fixed in inequality by presenting one another with alternate narratives and narrative positions, which motivate social action.

## CHAPTER I INTRODUCTION

Among the cultural inventions of mankind there is a treasury of devices, techniques, ideas, procedures, and so on, that cannot exactly be reactivated but at least constitute, or help to constitute, a certain point of view which can be very useful as a tool for analyzing what's going on now — and to change it.

—Michel Foucault<sup>1</sup>

In Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, perhaps the most famous reform novel ever, one of the slave characters frees herself and her enslaved friend not by aligning her conduct with the Christian reform preached throughout the novel, but rather by taking advantage of both the openings in and the failures of this reform message. When Cassy approaches Uncle Tom with a plan for escape and revenge, one that requires him to behead their master, Simon Legree, she receives the moralizing response he gave to St. Clare and others: "'We must suffer, and wait [God's] time.'"<sup>2</sup> Uncle Tom then encourages her to model her conduct on that of Jesus, who spilt no blood except his own and even loved his enemies. Believing Jesus has already fought the battle, Uncle Tom tells Cassy their victory is to come. Uncle Tom, however, goes on to show Cassy an opening in this moral vision, one that allows her, like Eliza, to take advantage of her status as a mother, as a protector of a child: "'Missee Cassy,' said Tom, in a hesitating tone, after surveying her a moment in silence, 'if ye only could get away from here,— if the thing was possible,— I'd 'vise ye and Emmeline to do it; that is, if ye could go without blood-guiltiness,— not otherwise'"

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<sup>1</sup>Foucault, "On the Genealogy of Ethics," 261.

<sup>2</sup>Stowe, *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, 344. Future references to this text will be cited as *UTC*.

(*UTC*, 345). Cassy sees no way they can escape except by killing Legree, for he would use all his might to find them. But she suddenly gets an idea. "By what strange law of mind," the narrator asks, "is it that an idea long overlooked, and trodden under foot as a useless stone, suddenly sparkles out in new light, as a discovered diamond?" (*UTC*, 345). Uncle Tom, having shown Cassy an opening, provides the conditions in which she can see this overlooked stone in a new light, and she uses this diamond to cut through the lines of force in which she now finds herself. This plan brings hope, where before none had existed.

Cassy decides to haunt Legree to death. Her plan depends on the failure of the Christian reform message preached most emphatically by Little Eva and Uncle Tom. Legree's mother frequently preached this same moralizing message to him when he was young, but "sin got the victory, and he set all the force of his rough nature against the conviction of his conscience" (*UTC*, 323). Not only does Legree not reform, but he actually becomes worse because of his mother's attempt. "That pale, loving mother,— her dying prayers, her forgiving love,— wrought in that demoniac heart of sin only as a damning sentence, bringing with it a fearful looking for of judgment and fiery indignation. . . . He tried to drink, and revel, and swear away the memory" (*UTC*, 323). However, the his mother's ghost, Legree believes, continues to haunt him. Cassy takes advantage of his belief, occasioned by the failure of reform and its apocalyptic Christian context, by making it appear as if the garret is haunted. Furthermore, knowing that Legree would continue to search for them, Cassy comes each night to his room, pretending she is his mother's ghost. The haunting has the same effect as his mother's preaching: Legree becomes an even harder drinker, and he dies from it. By strategically reproducing the failure of Christian reform, Cassy brings about her and Emmeline's escape without "blood-guiltiness."

This representation of Cassy and her "stratagem" parallels a Foucauldian resistance to reform, one that locates and marks the weak points, the openings, and the lines of force

in power relations and strategically takes advantage of them in the present. Uncle Tom is both an agent of moralizing reform and a co-sufferer of it. That dual expertise allows him both to call upon Cassy to reform her conduct and to show her an opening in this moral code. She then sees something she had known in a new light and forms a new plan, one that takes advantage not only of the opening Uncle Tom's shows her, but also of the effects of the reform's failure, which she had previously noted in Legree. Cassy's practice therefore suggests that in order to resist both slavery and a moralizing reform that prescribes to slaves a conduct of patient suffering, one needs to pay attention to the moments of complicity between slavery and its reform and take advantage of the reform's failures in order to resist both. Michel Foucault also argues that in order to live in power relations, a necessary condition of any society, one needs to look for and strategically take advantage of openings and weaknesses. In his critiques of reform, Foucault suggests that because reforms fail, one needs to pay attention to these unintended effects, how they are put to use by the institutions that were supposed to be reformed, and find ways to appropriate these effects for creative resistances. Such acts of resistance provide ways of living in the present, rather than patiently suffering until either the revolution or the time when the reforms meet their stated goals. Moreover, by adding to or proliferating the resistances that are already occurring as the necessary correlative of the power relationship, Foucault's approach offers a way of going about the long and arduous task of changing the present.

The weak point Cassy marks and takes advantage of is that void created by the inability to suture together all elements of an ideological fantasy. With the character of Legree, Stowe shows how the millennial fantasy of a completely evangelized social space fails because something necessarily remains outside of it. On the one hand, figures like Legree were defined as un-American because they failed to adopt evangelized Christian characters. On the other hand, an evangelized Christian America required unreformed

figures like Legree to mobilize against because evangelicals need to convert others. This situation illustrates Slavoj Zizek's Lacanian argument:

[A]s soon as we try to conceive the existing social order as a rational totality, we must include in it a paradoxical element which, without ceasing to be its internal constituent, functions as its symptom— subverts the very universal rational principle of this totality, . . . the point at which the Reason embodied in the existing social order encounters its own unreason.<sup>3</sup>

The ghost of Legree's mother, then, is a phantom that results from this situation: on the one hand, she haunts Legree in order to convert him, but on the other hand, her hauntings only make Legree more unreformed. The contradictoriness of the ghost of Legree's mother highlights a weak point in the ideologically fantasized social field. Cassy notes this point and takes advantage of it. As I will show in this dissertation, such failures to actualize a fantasized ideological field often offer the weak points Foucaultian politics can take advantage of.

Cassy's stratagem, however, is the act of a charismatic individual. Her resistance removes Emmeline and herself from the oppressions of both slavery and Christian doctrine. But that is it. The resistance is not retained; nor does it lead to other resistances. In fact, Cassy and Emmeline go on to work in the evangelized colonization effort Stowe at the time supported as a solution to slavery. This movement is a type of talented tenth, formed from "picked men [sic], who, by energy and self-educating force, have, in many cases, individually, raised themselves above a condition of slavery" (*UTC*, 374). This group is to become a shining example of American self-reliance, one that will be acknowledged by the U.S. and looked to by other blacks as models for behavior. Born out of resistances to evangelical reformism, this group has now become another evangelical reform movement. In this dissertation, I will explore how resistances can be sustained

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<sup>3</sup>Zizek, *The Sublime Object of Ideology*, 23.

through collective movements that exemplify the trans-liberal Leftist politics of Zizek and Foucault.

In what follows, I will try to make a case for this trans-liberal Left, one that (1) critiques both oppressive social conditions and the reforms that, in attempting to remedy those problems, create new oppressions and (2) proliferates resistances to both of these oppressions by suggesting practices capable of acquiring meaning in contemporary struggles. Even though Foucault becomes more critical of reform after *Discipline and Punish*, I will argue that we need not throw away reform after accepting his critiques. Instead, we can read his critiques of the narratives forming the “common sense” that supports reform as challenges that then become what reform needs to work on in order to work on itself, to create itself in the present as part of the practices of freedom needed to live in power relations. Understanding that the social-science disciplines involved in reform will be slow to take up this work, this trans-liberal Left will also need to proliferate resistances, which often come in the form of appropriations, as is the case with Cassy’s “stratagem.” These resistances both help people to live in the present without having to wait for the overthrow of intolerable practices and provide the antagonisms reforms need to engage with in order to create themselves in the present.

#### Foucault's Critique of Reform

Foucault delivers his most sustained critique of the narratives upon which the “common sense” of reform is based in three texts: *Madness and Civilization*, *Discipline and Punish*, and *The History of Sexuality: An Introduction*. In each, Foucault suggests reforms become “common sense” by forgetting their origins, by representing effects as causes. In *Madness and Civilization*, Foucault claims, “What is constitutive is the action that divides madness, and not the science elaborated once this division is made and calm

restored.<sup>4</sup> In *Discipline and Punish*, he argues that punishment did not become more lenient because reformers recognized the human (or soul) inside the criminal; rather, punishment, to be more effective, had to become more lenient and did so by producing the human (or soul) as the limit beyond which punishment could not go and, later, as the target of a disciplinary power that sought to increase, use, and control bodies and their forces. In the first volume of *The History of Sexuality*, he concludes that sex is not that which we must engage in to free ourselves from power; rather it is the imaginary element produced by the biopower that gives access both to the life of the body and the life of the species, enabling both the analysis and mastery of individuality. By taking reform's effects as its causes, the "common sense" of reform's worth — the insistence that the conditions in which the mad are treated, the criminal are punished, and the perverted practice sex have greatly improved — directs attention away from the effects of modern power relations by portraying them as only repressive.

Foucault's method, therefore, is to write new narratives of reform, ones which return effects to causes and causes to effects in order to show how these effects are being used in the present. Not only do such narratives show how power is constitutive (and not just repressive), but by doing so also show how the "common sense" view has kept reform retrying the same old tired solutions to social problems. Foucault was particularly worried about power relationships ceasing to be reversibly relational and instead becoming "blocked, frozen, . . . blocking a field of power relations, immobilizing them and preventing any reversibility of movement."<sup>5</sup> For example, he is concerned with how penal-system reforms keep turning to the same solutions that assume "depriving people of their liberty is really the simplest, most logical, most reasonable, most equitable form of

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<sup>4</sup>Foucault, *Madness and Civilization*, ix.

<sup>5</sup> Foucault, "The Ethics of the Concern of the Self," 283.

punishing someone for an infraction of the law" and that therefore assume the need for prisons.<sup>6</sup> To return the penal power relationship to a more fluid state, he shows that the "common sense" about the penitentiary is relatively recent, that the technical invention of the penitentiary was integrated into the penal system and penal rationality only by the end of the 18th century and then for very specific, strategic reasons. By writing a genealogy of problems, by asking, "Why a problem and why such a kind of problem, why a certain way of problematizing appears at a given point in time," Foucault seeks to undermine the "common sense" of reform and give back to these practices "the mobility that they had and that they should always have."<sup>7</sup>

In the last part of *Discipline and Punish*, Foucault returns to the present concern over prisons and addresses how the effects of the penal relationship miss their goals and have continued to miss their goals even with reforms. He asks, "[W]hat is served by the failure of the prison; what is the use of these different phenomena that are continually being criticized[?]"<sup>8</sup> Foucault sees a consequence rather than a contradiction:

[T]he prison, and no doubt punishment in general, is not intended to eliminate offenses, but rather to distinguish them, to distribute them, to use them; that it is not so much that they render docile those who are liable to transgress the law, but that they tend to assimilate the transgression of the laws in a general tactics of subjection. Penality would then appear to be a way of handling illegalities, of laying down the limits of tolerance, of giving free rein to some, of putting pressure on others, of excluding a particular section, of making another useful, of neutralizing certain individuals and of profiting from others. (*DP*, 272)

Reforms fail to reach the goal of rehabilitating the criminal, but produce unforeseen effects that are then put to use. The prison, unable to rehabilitate all, has served rather well as a

<sup>6</sup>Foucault, "What Our Present Is," 412.

<sup>7</sup>Foucault, "What Our Present Is," 413-14.

<sup>8</sup>Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, 272. In the future, references to this text will be cited as *DP*.

mechanism for managing illegalities and thus managing populations of bodies. In particular, the production of delinquency allows for such management by allowing the police-prison system to segment a manipulable delinquency and thus separate delinquents from the population with which they remained linked. For Foucault, then, reform does not periodically shake the institution of the prison; nor is reform the dupe of the dominant class. Rather, reform is part of the carceral system itself. "Prison 'reform' is virtually contemporary with the prison itself: it constitutes, as it were, its programme" (*DP*, 234). Therefore, Foucault concludes, "[I]egal punishments are to be resituated in an overall strategy of illegalities" (*DP*, 272). The "common sense" of reform, in other words, needs to be returned to politics.

Penal reforms, by producing a penitentiary that functioned independently of judicial punishment, adjusting the punishment to rehabilitate the criminal, created the "carceral archipelago"— a series of institutions that function beyond the frontiers of criminal law (*DP*, 297). This carceral archipelago produces, by the same techniques, both docile-normalized bodies and delinquents. The delinquent is not produced outside the carceral network; nor is s/he cast out of it. There is no outside. The carceral network "saves everything" and uses it in the management of illegalities (301). As François Ewald notes, "The norm integrates anything which might attempt to go beyond it— nothing, nobody, whatever difference it might display, can ever claim to be exterior, or claim to possess an otherness which would actually make it other"; instead, the difference manifests a possibility.<sup>9</sup> The result, then, is a carceral net, not one that catches us, but one in which individuals and society itself is constituted through power relations:

Power is employed and exercised through a net-like organization. And not only do individuals circulate between its threads; they are always in the position of simultaneously undergoing and exercising this power. They are not only its inert or

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<sup>9</sup>Ewald, "A Power Without an Exterior," 173.

consenting target; they are always also the elements of its articulation. In other words, individuals are the vehicles of power, not its points of application.

. . . In fact, it is already one of the prime effects of power that certain bodies, certain gestures, certain discourses, certain desires, come to be identified and constituted as individuals. . . . The individual is an effect of power, and at the same time, or precisely to the extent to which it is that effect, it is the element of its articulation. The individual which power has constituted is at the same time its vehicle.<sup>10</sup>

So, while there is still a valuation at work, it is not grounded in anything outside.

Therefore, Foucault's definition of power stresses how practices create power relations. A society cannot exist without power relations, "if by that one means the strategies by which individuals try to direct and control the conduct of others," but domination does exist when the options people have "are ultimately only stratagems that never succeeded in reversing the situation" ("Ethics for the Concern for Self" 298).

Foucault, therefore, suggests that in such cases of domination, we need to know where resistance will develop. Once domination is overcome, then, we need to develop practices of freedom — "acquire the rules of law, the management of techniques, and also the morality, the ethos, the practice of the self, that will allow us to play these games of power with as little domination as possible" (298). Because Foucault sees reform as reiterating the same old options, leading to a state in which power relations rigidify, he argues for a need to do something else.

#### Creating Reform in the Present

By writing narratives that undermine the narratives of progress that support the repetition of reform, Foucault presents challenges to do something other than reiterate past solutions. By pointing out how reform fails and how the unintended effects of its failures are put to use in the management of illegalities, which in turn allows for the management of bodies and populations, his work invites us to put these effects to different uses. He does

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<sup>10</sup>Foucault, "Two Lectures," 98.

not call for an end to any practice, for he knows no practice can simply be removed: it needs to be transformed by altering the contemporary practices that leave vacant the hollow space which that practice actualizes. According to Paul Veyne, Foucault's most insightful thesis is:

[a] practice gives rise to the objectivizations that correspond to it, and it is anchored in the realities of the moment, that is, in the objectivizations of neighboring practices. Or, to be more precise, a practice actively fills the void left by neighboring practices; it actualizes the potentialities that these neighboring practices prefigure in hollow form. If these practices are transformed, if the periphery of the hollow shifts, . . . the practice will actualize these new potentialities, and it will no longer be the same as before.<sup>11</sup>

Therefore, one cannot compare torture and the prison under reforms; each of these practices owes its odd shape to the place left vacant for it by other contemporary practices.

Furthermore, this thesis suggests the difficulty of reforming any practice: such a change would involve changing all the other practices that surround it because in Foucault's dialectics every practice is related to every other contemporary practice. Therefore, Foucault draws our attention not only to incarceration, but to other educational, military, labor, and social-science practices. Because of this, those interested in social change, in keeping power relations from becoming non-reversible and predictable, need to proliferate the resistances that already exist as the necessary correlative of power relations.

Proliferating resistances, I will argue, need not occur only among nondominant populations, such as the criminals, the insane, and the perverted, though these populations have had to become experts at enacting truly creative resistances in order to defend themselves. Those involved in reform— criminologists, sociologists, psychologists, social workers, education experts, etc.— can take up the challenges of Foucault's narratives and the resistances seen in such things as the prison revolts in order to create

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<sup>11</sup>Veyne, "Foucault Revolutionizes History," 162.

reform in the present, a reform that arrives in the present with truly creative responses to social problems rather than a repetition of old solutions and forms.

Foucault's attitude toward reform was ambivalent. In his biography of Foucault, David Macey notes that until 1974 Foucault had little interest in helping reformers and was content that "legislators and reformers should be left to their own unfortunate devices."<sup>12</sup> Instead, Foucault saw the role of the intellectual as denunciatory and critical. His aim, Macey states, was "to ensure that certain 'obvious truths' and clichés about madness or criminality become more and more difficult to use, to ensure that, say, social workers in the prison service no longer know what to do or say, that words and practices which seemed self-evidently true become problematic."<sup>13</sup> In order to challenge the "common sense" to which reform appeals, the *Groupe d'information sur les prisons* (GIP), with which Foucault was allied, sought to make sure that "those held in various prisons had the opportunity to say for themselves what their conditions of detention are, what they find particularly intolerable, and what actions they wish to see developing"; this, the group argued, was the "only way to avoid 'reformism'."<sup>14</sup> The GIP, therefore, did not promote specific reforms, but sought to gather and disseminate information about the prison system.

Yet, the purposes Foucault describes here suggest something more than anti-reform. In attempting to make it difficult for reform to continue its "common sense," such criticism and problematization challenges reformers to reinvent reform. In a later statement, Foucault, writing on behalf of a political activist group, suggests, "Let us avoid the hackneyed problem of reformism and anti-reformism. It is not up to us to take responsibil-

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<sup>12</sup>Macey, *The Lives of Michel Foucault*, 374.

<sup>13</sup>Macey, *The Lives of Michel Foucault*, 404.

<sup>14</sup>Quoted in Macey, *The Lives of Michel Foucault*, 266, emphasis in original.

ity for institutions which need to be reformed. It is up to us to defend ourselves so well that the institutions will be forced to reform themselves.<sup>15</sup> Refusing to suggest that people wait for reforms to change or succeed, Foucault stresses the importance of defending oneself by working on one's existence. Nevertheless, Foucault sees such a defense as related to reformers' changing themselves, creating reform in the present in response to the antagonism coming from those who must defend themselves. When people defend themselves by changing or creating practices, reform practices must also change in response, and vice versa. Thus Foucault stresses that "resistance comes first, and resistance remains superior to the forces of the process; power relations are obliged to change with resistance."<sup>16</sup> But these changes in practices must be creative—and not simply negations ("anti-reformism")—in order to antagonize other practices to change and not just rigidify themselves through repetition ("reformism").

Foucault's discussion of Ancient Greek ethics, particularly the work on oneself in order to create oneself as a work of art, has been seen as an abandonment of the critique in *Discipline and Punish*.<sup>17</sup> The call to defend oneself, however, can be seen not only a response to the conditions of a normalizing disciplinary power, but also an attempt to change it. As Foucault shows, the Ancient Greek practice of caring for the self encom-

<sup>15</sup>Quoted in Macy, *The Lives of Michel Foucault*, 418. Macy writes that in 1980, Foucault was involved with the *Association Défense Libre*, whose aims were to "denounce the limitations placed upon defense lawyers, abuses of the accusatory system and violations of the rights of those facing prosecution" (418). The quote is from the group's introductory statement, partially drafted by Foucault.

<sup>16</sup>Foucault, "Sex, Power, and the Politics of Identity," 167.

<sup>17</sup>See, for example, Pizzorno, "Foucault and the Liberal View of the Individual." Pizzorno argues that Foucault, like Durkheim and Weber, was unable to finish the story of liberal-democratic regimes. Canguilhem, however, suggests that we read *The Uses of Pleasure* and *The Care of the Self* as a response "in the face of normalization and against it" (Canguilhem, "On *Histoire de la folie* as an Event," 32).

passed one's relation to others as well: one could govern others well only if one governed oneself well, and vice versa. Foucault did not see the individual as the only one who needs to do reflexive work. Instead, he sees it as necessary for a society and justice to work on themselves as well. "[f]or, like society, a justice which always has to question itself can exist only if it works on itself and its institutions."<sup>18</sup> The problematizations posed to reform and institutions by intellectuals and by those who have had to learn to defend themselves create the antagonisms society, justice, reform, and selves need to work on themselves.

In a late interview, Foucault redefines his works as studies of how the human subject fits into certain games of truth. Earlier, he says, he worked on this problem either in terms of coercive practices, such as those of psychiatry and the prison system, or in terms of theoretical or scientific games, such as the analysis of wealth, of language, and of living beings. His later works approach the problem in terms of the practice of the self. For Foucault, the subject is not a substance, but a form that is not always identical to itself. That form, that relation to oneself, is different each time one engages in a different practice.

Undoubtedly there are relationships and interferences between these different forms of the subject; but we are not dealing with the same type of subject. In each case, one plays, one establishes a different type of relationship to oneself. And it is precisely the historical constitution of these various forms of the subject in relation to the games of truth which interests me.<sup>19</sup>

In *The Sublime Object of Ideology*, Slavoj Zizek argues against the theory of the subject Foucault implies in his discussion of self-stylization. The subject, Zizek argues, cannot be reduced to the positions of the subject, since before subjectification, the subject is the subject of a lack. For Zizek, this lack is the Lacanian *objet a*, which he sees as best defined by Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe as that positivization of a void opened in

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<sup>18</sup>Quoted in Macey, *The Lives of Michel Foucault*, 421.

<sup>19</sup>Foucault, "The Ethics of the Concern for Self," 290-1.

reality by antagonism, a traumatic social division which cannot be symbolized.<sup>20</sup> Any attempt at guaranteeing the identity of an object, such as the democratic state or the self, by naming it does so retroactively: the object has no positive consistency, but is discursively constructed by a positivization of the void, which is the only thing about the object that stays the same. For Zizek, then, the subject is nothing but the name given to the positivization of the void from which the subject can perceive itself as something lacking. In order to escape the things which would point us toward the existence of this void, we use ideology. For Zizek, then, we do what we do because the level at which we act, ideological reality, is structured by fantasy, which is an escape from knowledge about the Real.

Foucault also takes into consideration the status of a void. According to Veyne, for Foucault:

[h]uman phenomena are exceptional: they are not ensconced in the plenitude of reason; there is empty space around them for other phenomena that we in our wisdom do not grasp; what is could be otherwise. . . . [These phenomena] cannot be taken for granted, although for contemporaries and even for historians they seem to be so self-evident that neither the former nor the latter notice them at all.<sup>21</sup>

According to Foucault, we do what we do because of a preconceptual practice, which is the actualization of the space left by other contemporary practices, which in turn are determined by history as a whole:

These conditions of possibility inscribe all reality within a two-horned polygon whose bizarre limits never match with the ample folds of a well-rounded rationality [or ideology]; these unrecognized limits are taken for reason itself and seem to be inscribed in the plenitude of some reason, essence, or function. Falsey, for to constitute is always to exclude; there is always emptiness around, but what

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<sup>20</sup>See Laclau and Mouffe, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*.

<sup>21</sup>Veyne, "Foucault Revolutionizes History," 147.

emptiness? Nothing, a void, a simple way of evoking the possibility of polygons cut out differently at other historical moments, a mere metaphor.<sup>22</sup>

In other words, because we ensconce our behavior in rationalizations ("things being as they are . . ."), we blind ourselves to the void surrounding each exceptional practice. The void that for Zizek results from the failings of the social is for Veyne's Foucault also the result of the failings of the social, the difference between the preconceptual practice and the reasons we give to ourselves and others for our behavior, the reasons we give for the exclusions we make whenever we act.<sup>23</sup>

Foucault's method, therefore, was two-fold. First, he set out to show that the rationalizations his adversaries gave for their preferences were genealogically wrong. He did this by noticing phenomena in their exceptional form, paying attention to actions or practices rather than lofty notions. Second, noting the tendency to remain unaware of the emptiness around practices, Foucault tried to show how we should learn to live with this condition by understanding that *things* (line prisons) are only objectivizations of determined practices and that determinations must be brought to light since consciousness fails to conceptualize them. Foucault most clearly worked out an example for how to do this late in his life when he returned to the Enlightenment he had infamously criticized. In "What Is Enlightenment?" Foucault discusses Kant's answer to the same question. Kant sees the Enlightenment as a bargain, as "the contract of rational despotism with free reason: the public and free use of autonomous reason will be the best guarantee of obedience, on condition, however, that the political principle which must be obeyed itself be in conformi-

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22Veyne, "The Final Foucault," 228.

23For Veyne, "the aim of Foucault the philosopher was not to claim that, for example, the modern state is characterized by a grand act of setting aside, of exclusion rather than of integration; his aim was to show that every gesture, without exception, at the level of the state or not always fails to fulfill the universalism of a reason and always leaves emptiness outside, even if the gesture is one of inclusion and integration" (Veyne, "The Final Foucault," 228).

ty with universal reason."<sup>24</sup> Thus Kant's present moment required critique to play the role "of defining the conditions under which the use of reason is legitimate in order to determine what can be known [*connaître*], what must be done, and what may be hoped."<sup>25</sup> Drawing his inspiration from Kant, Foucault defines modernity as an attitude rather than a period of history and defines the present as a motive for a particular philosophical task:

But if the Kantian question was that of knowing [*savoir*] what limits knowledge [*connaissance*] must renounce exceeding, it seems to me that the critical question today must be turned back into a positive one: In what is given to us as universal, necessary, obligatory, what place is occupied by whatever is singular, contingent, and the product of arbitrary constraints? The point, in brief, is to transform the critique conducted in the form of necessary limitation into a practical critique that takes the form of a possible crossing-over [*franchissement*].<sup>26</sup>

Towards the end of this essay, Foucault spells out how this attitude addresses the frequent debate over reform versus revolution. "If we limit ourselves to this type of always partial and local inquiry or test," he asks, "do we not run the risk of letting ourselves be determined by more general structures of which we may well not be conscious and over which we may have no control?"<sup>27</sup> Foucault answers this question in the affirmative, but notes we must give up the fantasy that we will ever gain a point of view giving us access to any complete and definitive knowledge of what may constitute our historical limits. We are, however, always in the position of beginning again. Foucault's conclusion here, I would argue, returns to reform but with an emphasis on the *re-*. If we do what we do because of the *forms* of preconceptual practices, then we must attempt to become aware of these limits, to make them conscious, so that we can experiment again and again with going

<sup>24</sup>Foucault, "What Is Enlightenment?" 308.

<sup>25</sup>Foucault, "What Is Enlightenment?" 308.

<sup>26</sup>Foucault, "What Is Enlightenment?" 315.

<sup>27</sup>Foucault, "What Is Enlightenment?" 316.

beyond them, changing our practices, and thus antagonizing other practices into transforming.

If Veyne's Foucault helps us understand why a particular fantasy at a particular time, Zizek's discussion of ideology helps us to understand why we offer rationalizations, why we have difficulty in making the preconceptual conscious: in order to avoid the Real, the void surrounding the exceptional practice formed through the antagonism (to use Laclau and Mouffe's term) among contemporary practices. There will always be antagonism in the social, and therefore, Zizek argues, the only way to break the power of ideology is to confront the impossible kernel which announces itself in our ideological system. One must learn to recognize the Real in order to articulate a way of living with it. To do this, Zizek argues, one must look for those ideological figures we use to stitch up the inconsistency of our own ideological system, the lack or void opened up by necessarily antagonistic social relations, and adopt a subjective position which finally accepts contradiction as an internal condition of every identity. The recognition of the role these ideological figures play shows us what is, in Foucault's terms, "singular, contingent, and the product of arbitrary constraints," those things that serve to cover over the necessary failures in the social. Such a recognition should then serve as impetus for experiments with other ways of drawing constraints, of re-forming the present.

#### The Role of Literary Criticism

This dissertation attempts to demonstrate and contribute to the trans-liberal Leftist project I defined above, a project that both proliferates resistances by making creative appropriations and that problematizes the "common sense" of reforms in order to antagonize reform into creating itself in the present, rather than repeat old solutions. Each chapter will offer a mapping of how these texts responded to the reforms of their day and, as with the above discussion of Cassy, mark practices that, in the words of Foucault, "cannot

exactly be reactivated but at least constitute, or help to constitute, a certain point of view which can be very useful as a tool for analyzing what's going on now — and to change it.<sup>28</sup> Through such readings, then, I hope to provide a discussion of current issues raised by reform, identify what in them is carried over from earlier periods, and look to earlier narrative texts for practices, overlooked by the "common sense" of reform, that may prove useful in proliferating resistances today and antagonizing reforms — and those living with or defending against reforms — to create themselves in the present.

Chapter 2 opens with a critique of New Temperance movements, such as Alcoholics Anonymous, which coerce members into accepting the identity of "addict" as their "true," foundational selves by requiring them to produce experience narratives in accordance with a particular style and form. This chapter revisits the historical roots of A.A. and the narratives that appeared when confession-style mutual aid was still new and fluid in order to find resistances that can be reworked to acquire meaning in present struggles against this reform's oppressions. Walter Whitman's Washingtonian novel, *Franklin Evans; or The Inebriate: A Tale of the Times* (1842) offers such a source. *Franklin Evans* shows how Washingtonianism attempted to cover over the social symptom described by Zizek, as its sobered hero comes to inhabit a utopia of peace, goodwill, and diffidence, while its "author" concludes with a vision of a mobilized citizenry preparing to create a nation-on-the-make. But the novel also offers moments that contest such temperance work. By drawing connections between inebrates, on the one hand, and Indians, "mulattas," and speculators, on the other, *Franklin Evans* points to how these figures were used to avoid the symptom in the social order. The fantasy of temperance movements offers people a way to avoid recognizing the necessary failure in the social order by mobilizing them against those who allegedly obstruct the actualization of their temperate

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<sup>28</sup> Foucault, "On the Genealogy of Ethics," 261.

utopia. By recognizing the role these figures play in the utopian imaginary, we are confronted with the need to identify with the failure to actualize a utopia rather than to act as if the nation-on-the-make's identity can be fully realized. Evans's drinking buddies point him in the direction of recognizing and identifying with this failure.

Chapter 3 argues that in *Moby-Dick*, Ishmael confronts this failure, this social symptom, and develops an ethics in response to it. Here, I read Melville's novel as a response to Emerson's corporate individualism, an attitude shared by liberal reformers, then and now. Emerson mediates the conflict between America's competing demands for self-sovereignty and group unity by imagining selves whose surface differences can be dismissed because of an underlying, unchangeable unity to which they should submit. Through this process, defiance and obedience — obedience to a higher authority that cannot be remade — become the same thing. Emerson, then, imagines a cure to the social symptom by putting everyone in his or her proper place through a three-step process. He (1) summons the reader to rely on what he or she knows from within, (2) defines this self-trust as accepting one's place in his or her age, and (3) locates the source of insight beyond one's contemporaries in transcendent destiny. In contrast, *Moby-Dick* mediates this same conflict by doubting Emerson's underlying universal and portraying the appeal to the "little lower layer" as a trap set by authoritarianism.<sup>29</sup> *Moby-Dick* contradicts Emerson's optimism about arriving at a founding Truth by portraying such completion as that which is forever barred to human beings. Yet the novel also recognizes our desire for this completion. How to deal with this desire becomes central to Ishmael's quest. Emerson's expectations result in phantoms that haunt us because they seem graspable but always turn out to slip away. When we see these phantoms as graspable, deep, universal meaning, instead of recognizing them as the results of our own Renaissance, Orientalist, and

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<sup>29</sup>Melville, *Moby-Dick*, 143.

transcendental expectations, we are tricked into sublimely drowning in submission to corporations. The ethics of *Moby-Dick* can offer a useful response to an America where corporate individualism attempts to make us feel that this loss of both private autonomy and public sovereignty feels OK and where liberals and reformers celebrate the loss of control to the forces shaping modern economies. This ethics, which I call "coffin-ing," urges us to abandon our reliance on inner-selves and unmodifiable law (Nature, Truth, forces, etc.)—so often portrayed in antebellum America as archeological digs through the Egyptian pyramids—in order to engage constantly in remaking the present in such a way that reminds others about that from which we are forever barred.

The kind of work *Moby-Dick* suggests as an ethics is further explored in Chapter 4. Here, I discuss how Nella Larsen's *Passing* responds to idealized domesticity, particularly as it was marshalled by post-Reconstruction African-American reform movements. In the face of segregation's horrors, African-American novelists and social activists like Mary Church Terrell preached the need for "[h]omes, more homes, better homes, purer homes" and engaged in the task of showing others their "proper" places in respect to this domestic ideal.<sup>30</sup> While these novelists and activists attempted to counter the rhetoric and the effects of segregation, they did so by appealing to the same fantasy as segregationists and eugenicists, the fantasy that if everyone could be shown and made to stay in his or her "proper" place, all domestic problems—both in terms of the nation and the home—would be solved. In the process, they both relied on and produced normative identity categories that served a disciplinary system of "race," class, gender, and sexuality. Larsen's novel offers a resistance in the series of intense and complex encounters between Irene and Clare that take place around the issue of passing, both in the sense of "racial" passing and "sneaking around." As Irene comes to feel torn between both identifying and

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<sup>30</sup>Quoted in Knupfer, *Toward a Tenderer Humanity*, 19.

disidentifying with Clare, these encounters problematize Irene's stubborn belief in the safety of "black" middle-class home-life and seduce her into joining in some of Clare's "risky" practices. Together these encounters offer a model for a push-and-pull game of friendship, a relationship of problematization as a practice of freedom rather than one of disciplinary positioning for visibility in an ordered public sphere. I conclude that the model of friendship offered here can acquire meaning in the present struggles of AIDS activism, as it suggests friends (etc.) can push and pull each other out of fantasies of domestic safety and into experimental responses to what is dangerous now by drawing upon each other's multiple and contradictory identifications.

Chapter 5 shows how the ethics of earlier chapters can be used to form collective responses to oppressions. Here, I read Fannie Flagg's *Fried Green Tomatoes at the Whistle Stop Cafe* as a response to the Reaganism that swept the country in the 1980s. Reagan attracted so many voters to his movement to reform big government by appealing to a paradise lost to which the U.S. could and should return. The parts of the novel that focus on Evelyn and Ninny reiterate Reaganite ideology, but the novel avoids portraying Reaganism as permanently triumphant. *Fried Green Tomatoes* shows how the exchange of anecdotes can be used both to support, in the cases of Ninny and Evelyn, and to resist, in the case of Idgie, the dominant culture's structures of subordination. The novel's various accounts of Whistle Stop represent a contest over how the 1930s will be remembered and how such accounts of that decade will be put to political use. Ninny's attachment to her Depression Era results in nostalgic otherness. Evelyn uses that decade in order to revive the 1950s in the 1980s. Evelyn's Reaganite use of nostalgic storytelling is countered by the omniscient narrator, who represents the 1930s in terms of a 1960s that can provide hope for future generations of activists. The omniscient narrator's anecdotes show how Idgie and her friends create a space that gestures toward a counterculture. By bringing together subjects from a plurality of social fields to exchange anecdotes, the Dill Pickle

Club creates opportunities to destabilize identities fixed in inequality by presenting each other with alternate narratives and narrative positions. These possibilities lead to collective acts of resistance, such as continuing to sell food to black railroad workers in defiance of the Klan and robbing government supply trains for impoverished blacks in Troutville. I conclude by suggesting how cooperative-learning classrooms and the kind of groups that are being increasingly formed around hobbies and self-fashioning can be sites for such countercultural work, the revising of past responses for present struggles.

I take, then, Foucault's longing as my own:

In reality, what I want to do, and here is the difficulty of trying to do it, is to solve this problem: to work out an interpretation, a reading of a certain reality, which might be such that, on one hand, this interpretation could produce some of the effects of truth; and on the other hand, these effects of truth could become implements within possible struggles. Telling the truth so that it might be acceptable. Deciphering a layer of reality in such a way that the lines of force and the lines of fragility come forth; the points of resistance and the possible points of attack; the paths marked out and the shortcuts. It is the reality of possible struggles that I wish to bring to light.<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>31</sup>Foucault, "On the Genealogy of Ethics," 261.

CHAPTER 2  
"IF YOU WANT WHAT WE HAVE, YOU DO WHAT WE DID":  
TEMPERANCE AND ITS OTHERS IN WHITMAN'S *FRANKLIN EVANS*

Who can tell how many Franklins may be among you?

— Thomas Mercein, President  
New York's General Society  
of Mechanics and Tradesmen<sup>1</sup>

Sobering Up(wards)

In a 1987 *New York Times* article, Major League Baseball pitcher Dwight Gooden described his stay at the Smithers Center in New York, where he had been sent for cocaine "abuse." Gooden found himself berated by fellow residents: "My stories weren't as good [as theirs]. . . . They said, 'C'mon, man, you're lying.' They didn't believe me. . . . I cried a lot before I went to bed at night."<sup>2</sup> Each year, thousands of people are coerced into treatment programs, the vast majority of which are based on the Alcoholics Anonymous (A.A.) model. Much criticism has been directed at the A.A. model, particularly its ineffectiveness and its requirement that members subordinate themselves to a "higher power."<sup>3</sup> Gooden's comment raises another, related problem: A.A.-style treatment

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<sup>1</sup>Quoted in Rock, *Artisans of the Young Republic*, 138. Mercein went on to promise his audience of apprentices that if, with the help of the society, they would shun "the alluring but fatal paths of vice and dissipation," then "industry, ardour, sobriety and perseverance in your different pursuits, will lead to successful competition in the world."

<sup>2</sup>Quoted in Brodsky and Peele, "AA's Coercive Tactics Are Harmful," 96.

<sup>3</sup>Studies suggest that A.A.'s success rates do not differ from rates of recovery without any treatment. See Bufe, "Studies Show Alcoholics Anonymous Is Ineffective," 77.

programs coerce members into accepting the identity of "addict" as their "true," foundational selves by requiring them to produce experience narratives in accordance with a particular style and form.

As Stanton Peele has observed, the narrative style and form required by the A.A. model and used in its advertisements "combine the direst possible predictions: if you think you have a drinking problem — *you do*; a drinking problem can only grow *worse*; a drinking alcoholic ends up either dead or institutionalized."<sup>4</sup> This narrative form has a history older than the meeting of A.A.'s founders, Bill W. and Doctor Bob. It finds its historical roots in antebellum temperance movements, particularly that of the Washingtonians, a temperance organization named after the heroic founding father.<sup>5</sup> Beginning in 1840, when a group of six tippling artisans turned its informal drinking club into a society for mutual assistance in adhering to the teetotal pledge, the Washingtonians sought to reform even the most confirmed drunkard through personal and public confession. This emphasis on speaking and writing one's experience narrative achieved great popularity in the early 1840s, but fell out of favor as members left for rival, particularly prohibitionist-oriented and elitist organizations. In 1935, A.A. unknowingly returned to the Washingtonian emphasis on confession.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Quoted in Wagner, *The New Temperance*, 68.

<sup>5</sup> Alongside the Washingtonian societies for men, the Martha Washington organizations for women soon emerged and rivaled the men's societies. Like their male counterparts, members of the Martha Washington organizations were of modest means. Women in these organizations helped provide clothing, money, and shelter for the reformed man and for women and children who suffered in intemperate households. They also provided publicity for women's temperance reform by speaking out on the problems of male intemperance and, less often, on the need to reform female inebriates as well. See Tyrrell, *Sobering Up*, 179-83.

<sup>6</sup> When a fellow A.A. member brought to Bill W.'s attention the parallels between their group and the Washingtonians, the founder was struck by the A.A.-style mutual aid Washingtonians offered a hundred years ago. See Wilson (a.k.a. Bill W.), *The Language*

By revisiting the historical roots of A.A. and the narratives that appeared when confession-style mutual aid was still new and fluid, one can find resistances that can be reworked to acquire meaning in present struggles against this reform's oppressions. Walter Whitman's Washingtonian novel, *Franklin Evans; or The Inebriate: A Tale of the Times* (1842) offers such a source.

On the one hand, the novel provides a typical Washingtonian narrative. Evans, a young man from the country, comes to New York City, where he falls in with a group of tipplers who introduce him to the alcoholic drinks to which he later becomes addicted. His downward career is marked by a loss of employment and property, the death of his first wife, and his involvement in a catastrophic love triangle. In the end, he inherits a large sum of money, signs the teetotal pledge, and enjoys a quiet, uneventful life. The novel ends with a "Conclusion" in which the author imagines the country coming together to drive out Old-World vices in preparation for America's emergence as an international power, one that reclaims the mantle of "City on the Hill." Whitman's temperance novel, then, offers a source for understanding the narrative patterns inherited by A.A.

While *Franklin Evans* accommodates Washingtonianism in many ways, it also deviates from other Washingtonian narratives. Whereas other narratives portray an artisan (like Perth in *Moby-Dick*) who had attained a comfortably successful shop and had lost it because of tippling, Evans loses his property while sober and returns to alcohol because of its loss.<sup>7</sup> Other narratives portray a confirmed drunkard who begins his reformation by signing the teetotal pledge; Evans, however, signs the pledge as an afterthought, after he

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*of the Heart*, 4-5 and Wilson, *Alcoholics Anonymous Comes of Age*, 125. See also Crowley, Introduction, 17-19.

<sup>7</sup>See, for example, the excerpt from Arthur's *Six Nights with the Washingtonians* in Crowley, *Drunkard's Progress*, 33.

has already sobered up.<sup>8</sup> Whitman's novel also contains an Indian tale and several chapters narrating Evans's hasty marriage to a "mulatta." Though these interpolated tales have been described as unnecessary, they draw telling parallels between the roles of Indians, African-Americans, speculators, and inebriates in antebellum hopes for and fears of progress. In these deviations and "excessive" additions, one can find both the forgotten logic of temperance and overlooked strategies for responding to the nation-on-the-make's "progress."

#### Founding Stories

The "higher power" A.A. members must subordinate themselves to is the model narrative of the alcoholic's "downward career." Members use this model to construct their own experience narratives, the central activity of A.A. As one proponent describes it, one becomes a member of the group by learning how to tell one's story.<sup>9</sup> After attending a few meetings, one reads and discusses the Twelve Step literature, particularly *Alcoholics Anonymous* (or the "Big Book"), which contains the experience narratives of Bill W. and Doctor Bob. The stories follow the same narrative pattern: what we used to be like, what happened (with "hitting bottom" as the climax), and what we are like now. The stories routinely portray ambition as a lethal illusion and sobriety as a utopia of quiet, peace, and goodwill. The narratives ignore social problems and portray social and political critique as distractions from working on sobriety. Finally, these stories are continually occupied with what is real and what is fake, portraying the alcoholic's "true" self as "illusional" or

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<sup>8</sup>See the excerpts from *Narrative of Charles T. Woodman, A Reformed Inebriate* (1843) and from *An Autobiography by John B. Gough* (1845) in Crowley, *Drunkard's Progress*, 880 and 155-158, respectively.

<sup>9</sup>See Gorski, "Alcoholics Anonymous is the Most Effective Treatment for Alcoholism."

"false."<sup>10</sup> Eventually, members produce narratives of their own downward careers. Through this procedure, they come to identify with the founding fathers, an important component of the program, one of whose mottos is "If you want what we have, you do what we did."<sup>11</sup>

By coercing people to identify with Bill W.'s and Doctor Bob's experience narratives, A.A.-style programs (and those who coerce others into such treatment) attempt to limit the available responses to socioeconomic problems. A.A. narratives portray the alcoholic's "true" self as based on a "false" foundation.<sup>12</sup> Yet one could argue that the selves produced by temperance movements are false: they result from narratives that decontextualize the behaviors they stigmatize, particularly by ignoring social problems and political critique. Sociologist David Wagner argues that these narratives of the addict draw upon "dry logic," a late-twentieth-century return of the antebellum era's slippery-slope argument that one drink (or toke) leads to utter destruction. Dry logic works by

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<sup>10</sup>This description of A.A.'s "Big Book" is indebted to O'Reilly, "'Bill's Story.'" Like A.A., the Washingtonians produced experience narratives that told what they used to be like, what happened, and what they were like now. They also portrayed success and ambition as dangerous and sobriety as a utopia of quiet, peace, and goodwill. Here too politics was seen as a distraction from temperance and even as a cause of inebriation. Drinking and discussing politics are linked in such works as T. S. Arthur's *Six Nights with the Washingtonians* (1842) and John Cotton Mather's (pseudonym) *Autobiography of a Reformed Drunkard* (1845). Finally, like A.A. narratives, Washingtonian stories are continually occupied with what is real and what is fake. John B. Gough, the most famous of the Washingtonian orators, linked his inebriation to his acting career and to the imitations with which he had entertained friends. Excerpts from these Washingtonian texts are reprinted in Crowley, *Drunkard's Progress*.

<sup>11</sup>Quoted in Gorski, "Alcoholics Anonymous Is the Most Effective Treatment for Alcoholism," 57.

<sup>12</sup>The most influential— and positive— analysis of A.A.'s theory of the alcoholic's "true" self being based on a "false" or illusional foundation is Bateson, "The Cybernetics of 'Self.'"

decontextualizing the behaviors it stigmatizes.<sup>13</sup> It also works by ignoring how such "intemperate" behaviors may be strategic responses to psychological troubles, personal problems (such as divorce), and racial, gender, and class pressures. Campaigns against adolescent sex, for example, can present this stigmatized behavior as economic and social suicide only by ignoring how teen pregnancy may be an advantageous strategy for those in the lower classes. With few career opportunities awaiting them, some are having children at a time when only the fewest and lowest-earning jobs exist, when free child care from relatives is most available, and before most of the medical problems associated with poverty tend to occur. By portraying these stigmatized behaviors as killers instead of as potential health risks, dry logic helps people and governments ignore troubling socioeconomic problems and, in effect, tries to eliminate other strategies besides middle-class liberalism for living with (as well as reacting against) those conditions.

Dry logic supports the central binary logic of liberalism by producing people who perceive themselves and others as either out of control or in control. According to this binary logic, to have self-control, one must subordinate the self to a higher-power model of control. Middle-class liberalism, therefore, implies a paradoxical internalization of a higher power to gain a selfhood that is really the self being controlled by that higher power. In A.A., the experience narratives of the founding fathers Bill W. and Doctor Bob serve as this higher-power model of control (or of an uncontrolled self that becomes controlled). In the early republic, founding fathers such as George Washington (the namesake of the Washingtonians) and Benjamin Franklin (the namesake of *Franklin Evans*) served as such

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<sup>13</sup>For example, studies reporting the deaths, illnesses, and accidents due to drug use (including cigarette smoking and drinking alcohol) decontextualize by ignoring multiple or ambiguous causes. "Thus, for instance, a percentage of, say, the lung-cancer deaths of blue-collar workers who smoked (even for only a part of their lives) are declared to be 'smoking deaths' even when the work settings, living conditions, environment, genetic makeup, and other circumstances of these workers may have contributed to or been the 'cause' of their deaths" (Wagner, *The New Temperance*, 80).

models of character. As Barry Schwartz argues, the early republic saw George Washington as both an esteemed role model and a sacred possession because his self-control exemplified how subordinating selves to the public good could resist tyrannical designs. Washington's representation came to embody "a society that valued character over genius, conservatism over dedication to change, [and] diffidence over ambition," a representation that would inform the utopia for the recovering addict.<sup>14</sup>

The paradox of self-control — of a self-control achieved through the self's subordination to a higher power, such as "the public good" — has caused some doubts. A.A. has been haunted by doubts over the sincerity of its members' transformations from prideful and ambitious to humble and content. As Edmund O'Reilly states, "Overly effusive self-proclamations of inner harmony, tranquility and emotional growth [in the conclusions to members' experience narratives] . . . veer too close to the display of pride or complacency for the liking of A.A. audiences."<sup>15</sup> Bill W. found himself tempted by the spotlight into which he was thrust and warned members and the organization against becoming involved in politics, religious controversy, and social reform.<sup>16</sup> At the beginning of the nineteenth-century, Schwartz notes, people feared public virtue was in decline, and although they clung to the Washingtonian ideal, especially when voicing fears of a new monarchy, they also questioned the authenticity of Washington's character. Eulogists had to address whether Washington might have used history for his own vanity, acting like a self-sacrificing patriot at the moments he knew he would have to in order to

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<sup>14</sup>Schwartz, "The Character of Washington," 202 and 204, respectively.

<sup>15</sup>O'Reilly, "'Bill's Story,'" 196.

<sup>16</sup>See Bateson, "The Cybernetics of 'Self,'" 333-34.

become a hero.<sup>17</sup> After 1830, middle-class Americans' fear of such insincere selflessness dominated advice manuals and periodicals. As Karen Halttunen states, middle-class Americans worried that, in an urban world of strangers where hypocrisy paid off, the founding fathers' model characters were being replaced by the American-on-the-make's manipulation of surface impressions.<sup>18</sup>

Since the early antebellum era, these "fake" selves have functioned as what Slavoj Zizek calls the social symptom, that which is both "*heterogeneous* to a given ideological field and at the same time *necessary* for that field to achieve its closure, its accomplished form."<sup>19</sup> Temperance movements appeal to a utopia of peace, goodwill, and diffidence, a utopia that will be achieved once intemperate selves have been re-formed based on the founding fathers' model characters. As seen in the author's "Conclusion" to *Franklin Evans*, the peace, goodwill, and diffidence of individuals is used to organize a nation-on-the-make. But, Zizek writes,

as soon as we try to conceive the existing social order as a rational totality, we must include in it a paradoxical element which, without ceasing to be its internal constituent, functions as its symptom — subverts the very universal rational principle of this totality, . . . the point at which the Reason embodied in the existing social order encounters its own unreason.<sup>20</sup>

On the one hand, these fake selves were defined as un-American because they seemed not to subordinate themselves to the higher-power model of self-control (the founding fathers) which defined the ideal citizen. On the other hand, these fake selves were necessary because middle-class liberalism could only achieve its accomplished form by posturing

<sup>17</sup>Schwartz, "The Character of Washington," 212-14.

<sup>18</sup>See Halttunen, *Confidence Men and Painted Women*.

<sup>19</sup>Zizek, *The Sublime Object of Ideology*, 21.

<sup>20</sup>Zizek, *The Sublime Object of Ideology*, 23.

against the "false" foundations of fake selves; by comparison, the paradoxical foundation of the middle-class self (a self whose self-control depends on subordination to a higher-power) is "true." The "fake" selves of intemperates, therefore, represent the paradox, the unreason within the Reason of the temperance utopia.

*Franklin Evans* shows how Washingtonianism attempted to cover over the symptom, as its sobered hero comes to inhabit a utopia of peace, goodwill, and diffidence, while its "author" concludes with a vision of a mobilized citizenry preparing to create a nation-on-the-make. But the novel also offers moments that contest such temperance work. *Franklin Evans*, through its frequent references to banks, borrowing, confidence men, and embezzlers, suggests that worries over inebriates, as well as Indians and "mulattas," were tied to the Jacksonian era's worries over the gold standard—whether money was real or fake, whether paper money was creating a contentious country of phonies and cheats, and whether credit was producing out-of-control buyers.<sup>21</sup> These references suggest that the reliance on the founding fathers' as "true" characters is similar to the reliance on gold as the "true" standard of value: in both cases, the "true" is fetishized as that which will maintain "civilization" in the face of "barbarism" and heal the symptom in the social order.

By drawing connections between inebriates, on the one hand, and Indians, "mulattas," and speculators, on the other, *Franklin Evans* allows us to see what dry logic and narratives of antebellum progress ignore: one narrative is always in a dialectical relationship with other narratives. The presence of these other narratives in *Franklin Evans* points us to the common goal shared by campaigns to remove or assimilate Indians, (ex-) slaves, and inebriates: the desire to create a nation-on-the-make, composed of mobilized

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<sup>21</sup>The most influential account of these anxieties is Halttunen's *Confidence Men and Painted Women*. These worries remain with us, as easy credit has led to increasing anxiety over (consumer) choice and, as Sedgwick has stated in "Epidemics of the Will," the feeling that we are all addicted to something.

yet quieted citizens identified with the founding fathers, by eliminating other visions of progress and other responses to revolutionary changes in socioeconomic conditions. As both a contribution to and an intervention in Washingtonianism, *Franklin Evans* can contribute as much to resisting the New Temperance as it did to A.A. By including tales of Indians, "mulattas," and speculators that seem both connected to and in excess of the story of an inebriate, *Franklin Evans* points to how these figures were used to mask the symptoms in the social order. By recognizing this masking, we are confronted with the need to identify with the failure to actualize a utopia rather than to act as if the nation-on-the-make's identity can be fully realized.

#### Excessive Storytelling

Gay Wilson Allen has shown that *Franklin Evans*'s much-criticized interpolated tales came from materials Whitman had on hand. Following this discovery, critics have seen the tales as peripheral to or in excess of the temperance narrative. Leslie Fiedler writes that the chapters narrating Evans's marriage to the "mulatta" Margaret "intrude so inappropriately upon Whitman's temperance novel." Agreeing with Fiedler, Karen Sánchez-Eppler analyzes the chapters narrating Evans's marriage as a separate text, unconnected to either temperance or the rest of the novel. David Reynolds, criticizing the "tawdriness" of the novel, claims the Indian tale and most of the incidents surrounding Evans's marriage have "nothing to do with temperance reform."<sup>22</sup> While Reynolds and Sánchez-Eppler have produced insightful discussions of these tales in terms of the trajectory of Whitman's career, they have left unaddressed what effects the inclusion of the

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<sup>22</sup>Allen, *The Solitary Singer*, 57; Fiedler, *Love and Death in the American Novel*, 301; Sánchez-Eppler, *Touching Liberty*, 57-63; Reynolds, *Walt Whitman's America*, 97. In "Whitman's Literary Intemperance," Dalke argues that the Indian tale and the chapters narrating Evans's second marriage are related to the text as a whole, but she does so by seeing anti-alcoholism, Indian removal, and slavery as shields for Whitman's criticism of the lack of "friendliness, love and sympathy for an erring man" (17).

Indian story and Evans's second marriage have on reading the novel, regardless of authorial intentions and later works. How do the inclusions of Indians, ex-slaves, and "mulattas" affect the temperance movements' representations of inebriates? How might the Indian tale and the chapters narrating Evans's marriage point to contexts for and problems with temperance reform?

The Indian tale itself is an anecdote of intemperance. Chief Unrelenting, whose very name suggests intemperance, invites a travelling stranger to spend the night in his lodge. While the stranger sleeps in the corner, Unrelenting tells his own son, Wind-Foot, of one skirmish in a long war between his tribe and the Kansi. As a young man, Unrelenting had come upon a Kansi man and child sleeping in the woods. Full of hate, Unrelenting was ready to murder both, but decided to spare the child, for "were they both slain, no one would carry to the Kansi tribe the story of my deed. My vengeance would be tasteless to me if they knew it not."<sup>23</sup> It turns out that the stranger had been that child, and hearing this story (while pretending to be asleep) arouses his desire for revenge. The next day, the stranger sets out to kill Wind-Foot while Unrelenting is away. Unrelenting arrives in time to see his son killed and, in turn, to kill the stranger.

Throughout the Indian tale, Whitman includes a number of words and descriptions that call to mind anti-alcohol rhetoric. The narrator describes Unrelenting in a way similar to how inebriates are described both later in this novel and in other Washingtonian tracts. Like the speech of a loud drunk, "The chief's speech trembled with agitation. He had gradually wrought himself up to a pitch of loudness and rage; and his hoarse tones, at the last part of his narration, rang croakingly through the lodge" (49). Similarly, the narrator describes the eavesdropping stranger as if he were an alcoholic with the d.t.'s: "His lips were parted, and his teeth clenched; his neck stretched forward— every vein in his

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<sup>23</sup>Whitman, *Franklin Evans; or, The Inebriate*. In the future, references to this text will be cited internally by page number alone.

forehead and temples bulged out as if he was suffocating— and his eyes fiery with a look of demoniac hate" (50). The portrayal of the angered stranger's eyes as "two fiery orbs" (50) finds its echo not only in "fire-water," but also in Evans's later description of a man in a state of drunkenness who has "eyes inflamed" (69). Finally, the story's narrator associates the enraged Indians with "serpents," a word later used in connection with alcoholic beverages. The Kansi stranger justifies his murder of Wind-Foot by saying, "Serpents are small at first . . . but in a few moons they have fangs and deadly poison" (52). When the stranger dies, he twists "his body like a bruised snake" (55). In an epigraph to a later chapter, alcohol is portrayed as a "stinging serpent" (141), and in Evans's vision of a completely temperate nation, drink is "the Snake-Tempter" (169).

The chapters narrating Evans's marriage to the "mulatta" Margaret provide another story of intemperate revenge. While in the South, Evans takes up residence at Bourne's plantation. He becomes attracted to Margaret, one of Bourne's slaves, and when she strikes an overseer after he harasses her, Evans intervenes in her favor. Eventually, he marries Margaret, who is happy with the arrangement because both she and her brother are manumitted and because she rises in class and "race" hierarchies. The morning after, Evans regrets his deed, portraying it as the result of being drunk on wine, and eventually begins to court a "white" widow, Mrs. Conway, who turns out to be a relative of the unforgiving overseer. Margaret, jealous of this woman, arranges a complicated plan to kill her. After some twists and turns, Margaret kills the widow, is discovered by the overseer, confesses to Evans, and kills herself.

The descriptions and rhetoric from the Indian tale appear in the chapters about Evans's marriage to Margaret. She is described as "unrelenting" (161), the name of the chief in the Indian tale. Like the Indians, she has fire in her eyes. Her presence near the widow is made known to the reader when "two bright small orbs, fixed, and yet rolling in

fire" appear in the window (162). Finally, just as Unrelenting lost Wind-Foot, Margaret loses her brother, whom she thinks of as a son, while pursuing her revenge.

By forming such connections among the anti-alcohol narrative, the Indian tale, and the chapters concerning Evans's marriage to a "mulatta," *Franklin Evans* suggests that in antebellum America, images and narratives of inebriates, Indians, and African-Americans were connected. All three figures were symbols of disorder and opposition to national progress. To remove them was the dream of those seeking to create a nation of quiet yet mobilized citizens poised for progress. As Daniel Feller has argued, during the Jacksonian era, "more than at any other time in our history, citizens believed in their ability to mold and direct their own destiny and that of the world."<sup>24</sup> This optimism, they felt, was justified because of their liberty. These three figures—enslaved to drink, the past, and to the condition of chattel—came to symbolize for many what held America back. As one preacher complained, "Every drunkard opposes the millennium; every dram-drinker stands in the way of it, every dram-seller stands in the way of it."<sup>25</sup>

These figures, seen as obstructing progress, actually faced problems caused by American "progress," particularly westward expansion, industrialization, urbanization, and internal improvements in transportation. Westward expansion was supposed to guarantee liberty and equality by keeping America free from the British urbanization and industrialization that exemplified class conflict for Thomas Jefferson and others. Jefferson had hoped that with the completion of the Louisiana Purchase of 1803 Americans would spread out and pursue the traditional goal of agrarian and familial independence. He and others had not foreseen, writes historian William Barney, that "the settlement of the West [would act]

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<sup>24</sup>Feller, *The Jacksonian Promise*, xiii.

<sup>25</sup>Quoted in Feller, *The Jacksonian Promise*, 108.

as a catalyst for, not a deterrent against, urban and industrial development."<sup>26</sup> By linking East and West, the transportation revolution provided the labor and markets for the West to produce large surpluses of foodstuffs for the East and for the East to produce large surpluses of textiles and iron products for the West. The enlargement of domestic markets helped make the Eastern port cities, such as the New York where *Franklin Evans* occurs, the seedbeds of industrialization. This market revolution ushered in by Western expansion and the transportation revolution created a number of problems for the nation. Indians' native lands became increasingly desirable, and their occupation of them blocked plans for "progress." With the addition of states and territories to the union, the U.S. was increasingly torn by arguments over slavery, especially since the illegality of importing slaves created a lucrative market for human chattel in the new territories. Finally, the market revolution, in tandem with the transportation revolution, disrupted traditional drinking patterns, making inebriation much more worrisome.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>26</sup>Barney, *The Passage of the Republic*, 11. While an average of 60,000 people a year migrated to the West between 1820 and 1860, the percentage of Americans living in urban areas (defined by the census as places with a population of 2,500 and over) tripled from 7 to 20 percent in the same period. From 1810 to 1860, farm employment dropped from 81 percent to 53 percent of the total work force, while manufacturing employment increased from 3 percent to 14 percent (Barney 10). See also Sellers, *The Market Revolution*, 34-69.

<sup>27</sup>In *Drink and Disorder*, Dannenbaum notes that "most males drank well in excess of four times as much hard liquor in the early nineteenth century as they do today" (3). Yet, he goes on to claim, one cannot explain the antebellum worries over inebriation through their high level of consumption alone. It had been nearly as high in the eighteenth century, but few Americans expressed concern. Before, Euro-Americans had consumed alcohol in communal settings. Four-fifths of all alcohol was consumed at home throughout the day, and drunkenness was limited to seasonal festivals and holidays. The commercial boom after the War of 1812 resulted in solitary toppers consuming more and harder liquor in different settings, usually in the form of weekly payday binges in public saloons that were largely unregulated. Because of the boom-and-bust cycles of the early-nineteenth century, those who spent their paychecks on liquor or who lost their jobs because the new work environment prohibited drinking on the job, were financially ruined, which frustrated the creation of an acquisitive industrial-commercial society.

Like anti-alcohol tracts in general, *Franklin Evans* telescopes these social problems onto inebriation. The novel opens with an anecdote of a farming family ruined not by these socioeconomic changes, but by alcohol:

Ten years before, he had been a hale and hearty farmer; and with his children growing up around him, all promised a life of enjoyment, and a competency for the period of his own existence, and for starting his sons respectably in life. Unfortunately, he fell into habits of intemperance. Season after season passed away; and each one, as it came, found him a poorer man than that just before it. . . . The truth is, that habits of drunkenness in the head of a family, are like an evil influence—a great dark cloud, overhanging all, and spreading its gloom around every department of the business of that family, and poisoning their peace, at the same time that it debars them from any chance of rising in the world. (41)

Evans the narrator goes on to say that because "all the old domestic enjoyment and content, seemed fled for ever," the tavern keeper's sons had left him "to seek their living in a more congenial sphere" (41-2). Whereas the market and transportation revolutions caused many farms to fail and whereas the diminishing supply of Northeastern land sent many sons (and daughters) to the cities to seek their livelihood, this anecdote blames the farmer's drinking for ruining the farm and the domestic atmosphere that supposedly would have kept his family successful, happy, and together.

Later, however, *Franklin Evans* draws attention to the socioeconomic contexts missing from the anecdote of the tavern keeper. Evans portrays his own move to New York City as the result of the changing fate of New England farming communities. Upon losing his father, Evans is apprenticed to his uncle, a poor but charitable farmer. The uncle, knowing he could not give Evans part of his farm since his own family is quite large, waives the last two years of the apprenticeship to allow Evans either to attend school or go to New York City. With "the anxious and ambitious heart of youth" (61), the nineteen-year-old Evans decides to seek his fortune in the city. Evans's story is emblematic of many young men:

Thousands had gone before me [Evans says], and thousands were coming still. Some had attained the envied honors—had reaped distinction—and won princely estate; but how few were they, compared with the numbers of failures! How many

had entered on the race, as now I was entering, and in the course of years, faint, tired, and sick at heart, had drawn themselves out aside from the track, seeking no further bliss than to die. (61)

As the novel makes clear at this point, not drink, but the stresses faced by farming communities and the pressures of competition in the big city played a significant role in the "dissipation" of these young men.

Despite drawing attention to the effects of young men's drive for unlikely success, the narrator goes on to offer hope:

To be sure, [Evans continues,] thousands have gone before me, in the struggle for the envied things of existence, and failed. A stout heart, and an active arm, were the great levers that might raise up fortune, even for the poor and unfriended Franklin Evans. In our glorious republic, the road was open to all; and my chance, at least, was as good as that of some of those who had began with no better prospects. (62)

Like his namesake, who overcomes the odds in colonial Philadelphia, Evans believes a young man's health—his "stout heart, and an active arm"—can overcome the competition.<sup>28</sup> This hope forgets the previous claim that competition itself can ruin the young man's body, that it makes him "faint, tired, . . . sick at heart" and suicidal.<sup>29</sup> If Evans's previous claim about competition ruining even young men had caused some readers to note the injustice of "progress," here he tries to dissipate that anger by rehearsing the narrative of Benjamin Franklin.

<sup>28</sup>See Franklin, *The Autobiography*.

<sup>29</sup>As Sellers notes in *The Market Revolution*, "[m]ost of the prominent [antebellum] families studied by historians, from business Tappans to clerical Beechers to presidential Adamses, seem to have had one or more victims [of alcoholism]" (260). Henry Clay, Jr., for example, resorted to alcohol in order to keep his fears of being unsuccessful from making him anti-social, a clear detriment to forging the connections that would allow one to rise and to displaying the traits that would demonstrate a middle-class character (see Sellers 261). Told they are or should be simultaneously excessive ("so great," "so eager"), risk-taking (or enterprising), and temperate (not excessive), individuals on the rise felt, and continue to feel, the strain of balancing these contradictory demands in themselves, their businesses, and their country, especially during hard times. "The great American whiskey binge," Sellers concludes, "was fed primarily by the anxiety of self-making men" (260).

*Franklin Evans* shows how this pattern of arousing indignation only to use it to motivate people to take up their positions in the emerging market was typical of reformers. In narrating his experiences with alcohol, the narrator as temperance advocate parallels Stephen Lee, the narrator of the Indian tale. Lee is a seemingly contradictory character who both makes an appeal for the Indians and secures Evans's first two jobs, which were at the center of the socioeconomic changes responsible for the Indians' decimation. Lee opens his Indian tale by speaking "so fervently in behalf of the Indians," passionately criticizing how Anglo-Americans have dispossessed "the hapless red men" of their native lands and homes, particularly by introducing rum among them. The audience "feel[s] the justice of his remarks" (45) and criticizes the ways Indians have been treated. But then Lee tells an anecdote (the one about Chief Unrelenting) that portrays Indians as vanishing not through the intemperance introduced to them by Anglo-Americans, but through their own perpetuation of intemperate violence among themselves. After listening to the tale, Evans notes, "there was silence among us; for the luckless death of the poor Indian boy seemed to cast a gloom over our spirits, and indispose us for conversation" (56). By relating this anecdote, Lee has shifted his own and his audience's attention away from the social and political contexts of the decimation of New England Indian tribes and has quieted down the conversation of an audience aroused by his previous outrage. Lee can therefore go on to offer Evans jobs in legal clerking (for a lawyer who is also a bank officer) and in clerking for a speculator (Lee himself).

The effects of the reforms the narrator and Lee preach, therefore, differ from the goals they claim for themselves. Supposedly attempting to free inebriates, Indians, and African-Americans from the enslavements that make them intemperate obstructions to the nation's "progress" in "civilization," these reformers quiet down people's angered sense of justice while motivating them for their assigned tasks in the emerging market order. By seeing the Indian tale (along with Lee's preface to it) and Evans and Margaret's marriage as

peripheral to the novel's temperance narrative, literary critics risk forgetting the connections between the inebriate, the Indian, and the (ex-)slave and, in effect, end up supporting a New Temperance that also depends on a rhetoric of freeing those enslaved to illicit behaviors and decontextualizing their narratives from those of others.<sup>30</sup>

#### Good as Gold

After the Panics of 1819 and 1837, many Americans who had championed the spirit of improvement and enterprise began to take notice of the perils of unchecked development and to assess blame. Recoiling when the spirit of enterprise produced rampant speculation, excessive debt, and abuse of privilege, "speakers on all sides sought somehow to capture the benefits of enterprise while avoiding its excesses. They wanted growth without extravagance, energy without recklessness."<sup>31</sup> For many Americans, the inebriate, the Indian, and the (ex-)slave represented that intemperance, particularly the rash acts of violence that occasionally erupted in response to boom and bust. In the *Franklin Evans*, Indians, "mulattos," and women serve as figures for the violence caused by ambition. Both Unrelenting and his unknown visitor seek revenge for wrongs done to their tribes. Evans says Margaret had married him because of "[h]er ambition of rising above the low level of her companions" (149). When Evans's affair with the widow threatens this achievement, Margaret plots her rival's murder. The widow, too, is violently ambitious, as she has "but one aim, the conquest of hearts" (147). But it was the bank and the paper currency it circulated that people most targeted as the sources of commercial excess and privilege. And while responses to hard times included both proposals to curtail banking

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<sup>30</sup>As Warner reminds us, "[a]ddiction had been a legal term describing the performative act of bondage before it became a metaphor to describe a person's self-relation. Someone who is addicted to, say, Sabbath-breaking could be understood as having developed a habit, bound himself to a custom" (Warner, "Whitman Drunk," 32).

<sup>31</sup>Feller, *The Jacksonian Promise*, 44.

and plans to expand it, fear of the banks lingered as a potentially explosive sentiment.

*Franklin Evans* shows how Americans linked together inebriates, Indians, "mulattas," and speculators as signs of the dangers of a nation-on-the-make.

The narrative portrays Evans's loss of employment, which begins his downward career, as due to the drinking parties that had kept him from adopting the ambitious business supposedly needed to respond to unexpected changes in the market. In this portrayal, *Franklin Evans* follows other temperance tracts, which depicted a person's or a family's hard times as due to alcohol consumption. But because the novel follows the Washingtonian sympathy for seemingly irredeemable drunks, it connects worried responses to inebriation to worries caused by the elite abusers of banking and credit. Like Indians and alcohol, embezzlers such as Evans's first boss are equated with snakes. But while embezzlers use the "wisdom of the serpent" to ruin others, the inebriate is the victim of the serpent in the cup (81). Chapter Six, therefore, juxtaposes the rise of the embezzler, who cannot be touched by the law, to the fall of Dennis, the man fired by Evans's first boss for drinking and imprisoned for stealing a loaf of bread. Such a juxtaposition suggests that the intemperance of the inebriate served as a scapegoat for the intemperances of those who used and abused the banking system and the laws supporting it.

*Franklin Evans* goes even further in its criticism of enterprise and banking. Typically, temperance tracts show how individuals who had achieved a comfortable or even successful existence had lost it because of their drinking. Whitman's novel, however, shows how Evans—now sober, employed, and newly married (to his first wife)—returns to drinking because his ambition to own property results in failure. Evans's new boss offers him the opportunity to purchase a vacant lot. "Straightway," Evans says, "visions of independence and a home of my own, and the station of a man of property, floated before my eyes" (97). Like his namesake, Benjamin Franklin, Evans takes advantage of this opportunity to rise, but when his "means f[ai]ll out," his easily worried creditors seize

his little property. The experience leaves him, like the drunkard after a binge, "half crazed" (98). As a result, he returns to drinking, paying no attention to the needs of his wife, who dies of starvation. Like bourgeois reformers in general, Evans blames drinking for his fall from comfort. After his first wife's death, he comes upon Colby, who had introduced him to drinking parties, and is ready to murder his former friend for causing his ruin. Yet the ambitious use of credit, rather than alcohol, had been the serpent here. "[A]bout a year after our marriage," Evans had said,

the serpent came into our little Eden! Ambition — the poison that rankles in the hearts of men, and scorches all peace, and blights the bloom of content — ambition entered there. What is called low life, affords, perhaps, as much scope for this intoxicating passion, as that sphere which called forth the ardor of Napoleon, or which brings into play the mighty minds of statesmen. And petty as the objects among the poor may seem, they are striven for as eagerly, and the chase after them is attended with as many doubts, and as many fluctuations and fevers, as mark the gaining of generalships or cabinet offices. (97)

Transforming the narrative of the alcoholic who loses his property, health, family, and wife into a narrative of the downward career of the enterprising user of credit, Whitman's novel portrays Franklinian enterprise as the "Great Master" (98) that enslaves and ruins the body, both individual and national.

The story of Evans's unsuccessful enterprise showcases another problem with ambition that temperance attempted to respond to: the ability of easy credit and paper money to allow people to appear other than they "truly" are. The temptation of credit lures Evans and his first wife away from their habit of staying true to their means, of "never purchas[ing] until we saw the means of payment, and never promis[ing] unless we had made such arrangements that we felt pretty sure we could perform" (97). Such easy access to credit led many commentators to complain that nobody knew whose character was "truly" valuable. Again, Evans's narrative telescopes worries over fake successes and the loss of trust in "true" selves onto the Indian, the (ex-)slave, and the inebriate. In Lee's Indian tale, Unrelenting is fooled by a visitor pretending to be a friendly guest. In the

chapters narrating Evans's marriage, Margaret's plan involves her brother pretending to be a friendly companion to the widow, Mrs. Conway. Mrs. Conway, whose name suggests she too is a con-artist, keeps hidden her kinship to the overseer angered by Evans and Margaret. One of Evans's drinking buddies pretends to be a business partner while charging Evans for the cost of his drinks.

But *Franklin Evans* goes further than reproducing the Age of Brass's worries over being able to identify fakes by suggesting that such acting can itself make true selves false and false selves true. Confessing that he feigned passion for Mrs. Conway in order to mortify his wife, the narrator says he came to find "the feeling I began by dissembling, I after awhile really felt in truth. Like the actor who plays a part, I became warmed in the delineation, and the very passion I feigned, came to imbue my soul with its genuine characteristics" (148). The narrator links these kinds of transformations to both the gold standard and inebriation: "My unsophisticated habits had worn away, but at the expense of how much of the pure gold, which was bartered for dross" (114). Evans sees his initiation into drinking as an exchange of his truly valuable or "pure gold" self for a self that is "dross," trivial matter or an impurity. Having made a bad trade, Evans is now as worthless as paper money. He sees himself as "a miserable object" (115), circulating "like a rudderless boat" through the marketplace and standing "vacantly" before its activities (116). Just as paper money was out of control, a vacant object signifying neither real wealth nor real labor as it circulated through the marketplace, the inebrate moves about intemperately and without value for a capitalism in which he can seemingly be neither producer nor consumer.

The portrayal of the inebrate as paper money neither signifying for nor contributing anything to a market-oriented society implies that temperate citizens are as good as gold, a standard unto themselves, possessing characters really worth something for both production and consumption. If, however, the drunk is worthless in his circulation in a market-

oriented society, then he is spectacularly so, unable to fool people into thinking he is (or is worth) something he is not. In popular representations, he is spectacularly friendly, criminal, out of control, and lascivious, easily identified by employers or passers by. At the same time, the inebriate is "truly" none of these things, as he is under the influence. As Walter Benn Michaels has argued about gold and paper money,<sup>32</sup> the inebriate undermines while producing the real and the fake. For the inebriate, both the real and the fake only exist somewhere else: the drunk's real (or fake) self is the sober man and the sober man's real (or fake) self is the drunk. The narrative of his self, whether drunk or sober, is also its other. Temperance may have tried to fix value in a temperate character, just as critics of banknotes attempted to fix it in the gold standard, but the movement was ultimately left with vacant terms requiring a steady supply of narratives attempting to freeze the dialectic by delineating what one was, what happened, and what one is now. This is why the inebriate needs to sign the temperance pledge and why the contemporary alcoholic needs to be a life-long member of A.A.

The narrator of *Franklin Evans* offers such a narrative, but not a very clear one. The inebriate seems to be worthlessly circulating through society, exchangeable with other worthless or obsolete types, such as the Indian and the slave, and clearly separated from the temperate, who is a standard unto himself. But Whitman's novel continuously makes connections between the intemperate and the temperate. The sober Evans is intemperate in his ambitious use of credit, the temperate Lee intemperately fires Evans, and the drunk is more temperate in his assessment of his non-drunk relatives than they are of him. While the narrator portrays his relation to his past, drunk self as one of progress and improvement, the wording suggests that one intemperate behavior, drinking alcohol, is quickly

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<sup>32</sup>See Michaels, *The Gold Standard and the Logic of Naturalism*, 139-180. Michaels's book is largely a discussion of the turn of the century, but his remarks about gold on these pages also apply to earlier debates over the gold standard.

replaced by another intemperate behavior, daydreaming, which is spoken of as if it were still another intemperate behavior, masturbation:

I think there is even a kind of satisfaction in deliberately and calmly reviewing actions that we feel were foolish or evil. It pleases us to know that we have the learning of experience. The very contrast, perhaps, between what we are, and what we were, is gratifying. . . .

. . . The formal narration of [such foolish acts], to be sure, is far from agreeable to me — but in my own *self-communion* upon the subject, I find a species of entertainment. I was always fond of day-dreams — *an innocent pleasure, perhaps, if not allowed too much latitude.* (165, emphasis mine)

Finally, if the intemperate is worthless "dross," then so too is the temperate. Once Evans signs the teetotal pledge, he has nothing left to narrate because he has done nothing else. He even describes himself as if he were dead, calling his life after signing the temperance pledge "my after life" (180). Even when he sees his old friend Colby, "cutting up his antics in the street," Evans hurries away. No longer does he desire to kill Colby for introducing him to alcohol, but neither does he try to lead him to the nearest Washingtonian meeting. Free of both intoxicating beverages and ambition, Evans has ceased to work in the social sphere, has ceased therefore to live.

Like most Washingtonian narrators, then, Evans has little to say about what he is like now. As David Reynolds and John Crowley report, antebellum critics often charged the Washingtonians with being interested only in the salacious parts of their stories, as evidenced by the little space they give to narrating sobriety.<sup>33</sup> Similar criticisms have been advanced by critics of A.A. narratives.<sup>34</sup> But the antebellum connection between intemperance and money offers another explanation. If, like gold, the temperate is the standard of value, independent of other terms, then there is no gap, no room for mobility or change, and thus no desire. The antebellum connection between intemperance and

<sup>33</sup>See Reynolds, "Black Cats and Delirium Tremens," and Crowley, Introduction.

<sup>34</sup>See O'Reilly, "'Bill's Story.'"

ambition, a connection also made by A. A., makes clear that the temperate man is one who does not desire. Even the quest to reform other inebriates runs the risk of making the temperate intemperate, and antebellum critics of reform often complained that reformers were very intemperate about temperance.

Evans's vision of a completely temperate nation attempts to address this problem by suggesting how the temperate could become mobilized for "progress" while remaining quiet. In Evans's dream, everyone has not only signed the temperance pledge, but also has mobilized into an "Army of the Regenerated," many of whom now march in a procession:

First came a host of men in the prime of life, with healthy faces and stalwart forms, and every appearance of vigor. They had many banners, which bore mottoes, signifying that they had once been under the dominion of the Tempter, but were now redeemed. Then I saw a myriad of youths, with blooming cheeks and bright eyes, who followed in the track of those before, as in time they no doubt would occupy their stations in the world. There were rich equipages, also, containing the officers of the state, and persons of high rank. (168)

The procession represents Evans's optimistic narrative of free labor, with youths willingly marching behind their elders because they know one day they will occupy stations in the world. It also represents the end of class tensions, as the rich equipages containing officers and persons of high rank pass peacefully along, unhindered by those who must walk or watch. All are mobilized for "progress," but without intemperate ambitions, as they accept their current positions, believing that in due time they will advance. Evans's vision suggests that by making the nation completely teetotal, which in turn will create citizens content with their positions in the march of progress, the U.S. can achieve its status as "a mighty and populous empire" (166). No longer would bourgeois New Yorkers, such as George Templeton Strong, fear that "we shall have a revolution here."<sup>35</sup>

Yet there is something outside of this compact body, and that is Franklin Evans himself. In his dream, Evans comes upon this scene unaware of what it all means. While

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<sup>35</sup>Quoted in Sellers, *The Market Revolution*, 355.

everyone else is where he or she is supposed to be, Evans wanders around. Since he has this dream before signing the teetotal pledge, he is actually the unknown last unregenerate. Like the inebriate, the Indian, and the "mulatta"/slave, the Evans in the dream is seemingly peripheral to this nation-on-the-make. Yet as the conclusion's call-to-arms makes clear, a nation defined as on-the-make because of liberty needs some form of slavery to exist in order to have something to mobilize against, even if that mobilization will be directed to other purposes. As the unknown last unregenerate, Evans serves that function, and the temperance speech and parade are, in effect, addressed to him.

#### Going Backstage

Evans's status as wanderer in his dream shows how the fantasy of a nation-on-the-make composed of mobilized yet quieted citizens, each in his or her proper position, never achieves its accomplished form. At the utopian moment when the country claims to have converted "The last vassal of the Tempter" (167) and to have formed everyone into an "Army of the Regenerated" poised for "progress," *Franklin Evans* points to the existence of one last "unregenerate," the sign of something that necessarily remains outside of but necessary to an ideological field, such as the nation-on-the-make. The last unregenerate is heterogeneous to this field and at the same time necessary for that field to achieve its closure through mobilization against intemperance. In his discussion of the social symptom, Zizek argues that the only way to break the power of ideology is to confront the impossible which announces itself in our ideological system. To do this, Zizek argues, we must look for those ideological figures we use to stitch up the inconsistency of our own ideological system and adopt a subjective position which finally accepts contradiction as an internal condition of every identity. Evans confronts the impossible while under the guidance of his drinking buddies, Colby and Mitchell.

At first glance, Colby and Mitchell seem to represent the urban corruptors who, according to Karen Halttunen, were stock villains in the antebellum advice manuals:

The seducer—whether rake or pimp, gambler or thief—begins his assault on the innocent youth by winning his confidence through an offer of friendship and entertainment. In the classic antebellum tale of seduction, he then leads the youth into a gorgeous theater—the seducer's natural habitat, for he himself is a skilled actor. He takes him to a fashionable club where he coaxes his prey into accepting his fatal first drink and gradually draws him into a card game. Finally, he lures his victim to a brothel where, if the theater and the alcohol and the gambling have failed to win him to a life of vice, illicit sexuality succeeds. The youth's character has been destroyed, step by fatal step, because he has been tricked into offering his confidence to a man without principle, a man whose art it is to deceive others through false appearances.<sup>36</sup>

Colby introduces Evans to drinking clubs and gorgeous theaters. Unlike antebellum advice manuals, however, *Franklin Evans* does not portray Colby as a destroyer of the rural youth's character. Not only does the novel frustrate such a conclusion by showing how Evans blames Colby when he should blame the ambitious use of easy credit for making him return to the bottle, it also shows how Evans's drinking buddies teach him how to maneuver through the new urban environment where people may not be what they appear. After imbibing at a drinking parlor, Evans, Colby, and Mitchell attend the theater. Here, Evans announces his attraction to a beautiful actress and to a young gentleman of perfect dress and manners. Mitchell first takes Colby and Evans to a restaurant, where they are served by a waiter who turns out to be the young gentleman. Mitchell then brings Evans backstage and introduces him to the beautiful actress, who sits at a table "eating some cheese and thick bread, and drinking at intervals from a dingy pewter mug, filled with beer. She was coarse—her eyes had that sickly bleared appearance . . . ; her complexion was an oily brown, now quite mottled with paint, and her feet and ankles were encased in thick ill-blacked shoes" (74). □ After these revelations, Mitchell and Colby do not tease the country youth about being taken in by surface appearances. Rather, they let Evans draw what

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<sup>36</sup>Halttunen, *Confidence Men and Painted Women*, 2.

lessons he will, and he concludes that “[t]he occurrences of the night . . . taught me to question the reality of many things I afterward saw” (75).

According to Halittunen, the 1840s witnessed a decline in the sentimental ideal of sincerity, and people were beginning to accept more avowedly theatrical cultural forms of middle-class expression. Earlier, the sentimental ideal had resulted in a contradiction: one proved one's sincerity by enacting certain cultural forms. The contradiction had resulted in anxiety over hypocrisy, which people addressed by increasing the number of formalized sincere social forms and rituals. Starting in the 1840s, people in the middle class were breaking this cycle by placing more faith in the cultural forms of genteel society than in sincerity. Those who belonged to the middle-class were those who followed its detailed rules with meticulous care while in public. The middle-class granted privacy backstage so people could prepare for their roles in polite society. Mitchell and Colby, however, bring Evans backstage, and by doing so, they keep him from investing in either the sentimental ideal of sincerity or the worldly acceptance of theatricality. Instead, he learns irreverence for that which claims the status of “reality.”

Antebellum temperance movements also addressed the contradiction in the sentimental ideal of sincerity. The sincere character did not take a drop of alcohol. But the increasing influence of the teetotal pledge suggested that even those with characters that are foundationally “false” or flawed could become acceptable if they enacted the proper cultural forms in public. The Washingtonians most famously adopted this strategy: one could be as good as gold if one adopted the behavior of a Washington or a Franklin. Such enactments, however, did not go unchallenged. Even though some commentators, such as Abraham Lincoln, championed the Washingtonians for their sincere feelings, others

charged Washingtonian orators, such as John Gough, with drinking on the sly.<sup>37</sup>

Furthermore, critics accused the Washingtonians, with their insistence on being teetotal, of being intemperate in their temperance. And the elite American Temperance Society (ATS) condemned the Washingtonians' forms of entertainment. As historian Ian Tyrrell informs us, "What these reformers found especially objectionable in Washingtonian amusements was a too-close association between temperance and the low life of the grog shop."<sup>38</sup>

The Washingtonians, then, came to symbolize the inability to rid the nation of intemperance. *Franklin Evans* itself has become identified with this failure, charged with being an excessive text, one that includes an Indian tale and chapters narrating a marriage to a "mulatta" in order to increase its sensationalist appeal. Yet these parts of the novel are closely linked by a rhetoric of intemperance to the parts narrating the inebrate's downward career. Such connections point to how the Indian, the "mulatta," the speculator, and the inebrate represented for many Americans that which (or those who) must be removed from a nation-on-the-make poised for "progress." By showing how, even in dreams of a completely regenerated and mobilized nation, one unregenerate must remain to mobilize against, the novel points to how these figures serve as that which is heterogeneous to an ideological field but necessary to it for its accomplished form. Mitchell and Colby point to these failures of closure, not by identifying figures who are at fault, but by going backstage, that private realm the middle-class allowed itself to prepare for their roles in polite society. Mitchell and Colby, then, teach Evans to be skeptical of "reality," of an ideological field that captivates us with a utopian vision of a complete and ordered society.

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<sup>37</sup>See Lincoln, "Address to the Washingtonian Temperance Society of Springfield, Illinois [1842]." On charges against Gough and other Washingtonians, see Reynolds, *Beneath the American Renaissance*, 54-91.

<sup>38</sup>Tyrrell, *Sobering Up*, 195-6.

Evans's visit to the gorgeous theater with Colby and Mitchell, then, suggests an alternative to temperance organizations, such as the Washingtonians and, later, A.A. Instead of bringing people together in order to convert through experience narratives their "false" selves into the pure gold molded on the founding fathers' characters, why not bring them together to experiment with other ways of living with the radical inability of the ideological field ever to achieve its accomplished form? *Franklin Evans* suggests the need for such work precisely at those moments it is most criticized for being excessive and sensation-mongering. The temperance narrative attempts to trap us into believing in the alchemical conversion of "false" selves into "true" selves that will allow the U.S. to recognize its identity as a nation-on-the-make poised for "progress." By connecting the narrative of the inebriate's downward career to such sensationalistic stories as the vengeful Indian and the tragic "mulatta," *Franklin Evans* draws attention to the fictionality of all these narratives and their interchangeability as social symptoms.<sup>39</sup> There is no "true" value upon which to fix the dialectic play between "true" and "false" selves, in-control or out-of-control subjects, except the necessary impossible element in the social order. George Washington and Benjamin Franklin, just like the vengeful Indian and the tragic "mulatta" (from James Fenimore Cooper's *The Last of the Mohicans*), are fictional narratives producing images of characters to be either copied or repudiated. The question, then, should not be "Who can tell how many Franklins may be among you?" but rather "How many stories and styles of producing stories can we generate as strategic responses to the failure of the social order ever to achieve closure?"

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<sup>39</sup>See Cooper, *The Last of the Mohicans*. For another response to Cooper, which also appeared in 1842, see Child's "The Quadroons."

CHAPTER 3  
ALL ABOARD: CORPORATE LIBERALISM  
VERSUS COFFIN-ING IN *MOBY-DICK*

[F]ar as any geologist has yet gone down into the world, it is found to consist of nothing but surface stratified on surface. To its axis, the world being nothing but superinduced superficies. By vast pains we mine into the pyramid; by horrible gropings we come to the central room; with joy we esp the sarcophagus; but we lift the lid—and no body is there!— appallingly vacant as vast is the soul of a man!

—Herman Melville, *Pierre*<sup>1</sup>

Reform and the Liberal Tradition

Historian Steven Mintz has characterized the U.S. reliance on reform, especially its antebellum variety, as part of America's laudable liberal tradition. "In the American context," he writes, "liberal reformers have been those people who believed in universal moral standards, who sought to remove arbitrary barriers that stifled individual responsibility and fulfillment, and who refused to acquiesce to social injustices in the name of laissez-faire economics and the free market."<sup>2</sup> Most reformers were liberals. They sought "to broaden individual rights, foster the fulfillment or salvation of the individual, and eradicate those institutions and customs that obstructed individual self-determination and improvement."<sup>3</sup> While admitting that these liberal reformers were overly optimistic about their ability to solve social ills and were often blind to their own paternalism and biases, Mintz

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<sup>1</sup>Melville, *Pierre*, 284-85.

<sup>2</sup>Mintz, *Moralists and Modernizers*, 154-155.

<sup>3</sup>Mintz, *Moralists and Modernizers*, 155.

nevertheless concludes that the liberal tradition should guide our approach to solving present-day social problems.

Christopher Newfield draws a different conclusion about America's liberal tradition. For him, antebellum optimism, paternalism, and biases are basic to liberalism and its undermining of liberation and equality. He argues that in attempting to address the apparently competing claims of the individual and society, American liberalism has privileged the center and moderation and ignored trans-liberal Left thought to the detriment of the country's social and cultural development. In Newfield's account, middle-class reformers have created a sense of balance that "rendered both freedom and democracy secondary to large doses of submission to preestablished and unequal conditions."<sup>4</sup>

Newfield would agree with Mintz that these reformers championed individualism, but would argue that this individualism is corporate rather than democratic. Both corporate and democratic individualism reject freedom defined as self-containment. But democratic individualism stresses public sovereignty, while corporate individualism champions "the enhancement of freedom through the loss of both private and public control."<sup>5</sup> Democratic individualism requires equality — an equality of power between those who make the laws and those whom the laws govern and an equality that defines freedom as participation in a variety of collective and explicitly political activities. Corporate individualism, on the other hand, rejects equality by defining freedom as submission to unmodifiable law, a submission that eliminates the need for explicitly political collective activities.

Newfield describes the corporate individualism upon which the liberal tradition depends as the Emerson Effect. His account stars Ralph Waldo Emerson as the principal architect of this tradition. Readers have long celebrated Emerson and transcendentalism for

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<sup>4</sup>Newfield, *The Emerson Effect*, 2.

<sup>5</sup>Newfield, *The Emerson Effect*, 5.

reconciling personal freedom and otherness, a radical individualism and a social self prepared to recognize others as part of itself. Newfield, however, finds neither radical individualism nor collective democracy in Emerson's writings. Instead, he finds a three-step process in which Emerson (1) summons the reader to rely on what he or she knows from within, (2) defines this self-trust as accepting one's place in his or her age, and (3) locates the source of insight beyond one's contemporaries in "transcendent destiny."<sup>6</sup>

Through this process, defiance and obedience — obedience to a higher authority that cannot be remade — become the same thing. Rather than a democratic individualist, Emerson is a liberal authoritarian. Emerson, Newfield concludes, has profoundly influenced "liberalism's balance of individualism and democracy [to such an extent that it] may frequently depend on an unstated submission to flexible but unchangeable higher law. This is the authoritarian moment in the liberal imagination — submission to the right law makes equality irrelevant."<sup>7</sup>

For a long time, Emerson's readers have avoided this authoritarianism by claiming his individualism is democratic because one freely consents to submit. Yet antebellum middle-class Americans were not so sure. As Newfield notes, their obsession with the varieties of group life suggests a need to find new syntheses of free self and unifying law and new forms of individuality "in a social modernity driven by the forces of the party, the mass, the racialized community, the statistical aggregate, and the managed organization."<sup>8</sup> The antebellum era was both the age of the individual and the age of associations, and while the business corporation, which became distinct after 1850, has become the dominant

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<sup>6</sup>The phrase is from Emerson's "Self-Reliance," quoted in Newfield, *The Emerson Effect*, 22.

<sup>7</sup>Newfield, *The Emerson Effect*, 34.

<sup>8</sup>Newfield, *The Emerson Effect*, 67.

form of association in the U.S., one can look back to this era for other, recuperable alternatives.

Herman Melville's *Moby-Dick* offers a particularly sustained engagement with the very problems antebellum associations attempted to mediate. Questions of to whom one submits when one consents to be a member of an association and of the conditions under which such a submission occurs loom large in this novel about a sailor who signs on to a dangerous and poorly paying whaling voyage, where men are massed together under the authoritarian rule of a captain rumoured to be mad. Emerson mediates the conflict between America's competing demands for self-sovereignty and group unity by imagining selves whose surface differences can be dismissed because of an underlying, unchangeable unity to which they submit. Emerson, then, imagines a cure to the social symptom by putting everyone in his or her proper place. In contrast, *Moby-Dick* mediates this same conflict by doubting Emerson's underlying universal and portraying the appeal to the "little lower layer" as a trap set by authoritarianism.<sup>9</sup> *Moby-Dick* contradicts Emerson's optimism about arriving at a founding Truth by portraying such completion as that which is forever barred to human beings. Yet the novel also recognizes our desire for this completion, and how to deal with this desire is central to Ishmael's quest. The ethics of *Moby-Dick* can offer a useful response to an America where corporate individualism attempts to make us feel that the loss of both private autonomy and public sovereignty feels OK and where liberals and reformers celebrate the loss of control to the forces shaping modern economies. This ethics, which I call "coffin-ing," urges us to abandon our reliance on inner-selves and unmodifiable law (Nature, Truth, forces, etc.)— so often portrayed in antebellum America as archeological digs through the Egyptian pyramids— in order to engage constantly in

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<sup>9</sup>Melville, *Moby-Dick*, 143. In the future, references to this text will be cited internally by page number alone.

remaking the present in such a way that reminds others about that from which we are forever barred.

#### Looming Doubt

The first chapter of *Moby-Dick*, "Loomings," challenges the transcendentalist belief that selves are grounded in a deep, universal foundation that is the hidden or lost meaning of life or Nature. Particularly, this chapter takes issue with the transcendentalist and Renaissance belief that surfaces foreshadow the deep universal, that "buried similitudes must be indicated on the surface of things."<sup>10</sup> In his essay on Goethe, Emerson claims, "The air is full of sounds; the sky, of tokens; the ground is all memoranda and signatures, and every object covered over with hints which speak to the intelligent."<sup>11</sup> The great poet possesses such intelligence, and it is his job to articulate a poetic self that is radically individualistic (or intelligent) because it has submitted to being sublimely led by the deep universal. While attempting to articulate a poetic self or narrator for this text, "Loomings" portrays Emerson's way of reading as a trap that makes us submissive and offers opportunities for readers to see Emersonian expectations of deep meaning as outlandish.

Despite giving us the particulars of his situation— having little or no money and nothing to interest him ashore, needing to purge and regulate his body, and wanting to knock off other men's hats— Ishmael insists his draw toward the sea is "almost" universal. "If they but knew it, almost all men in their degree, some time or other, cherish very nearly the same feelings toward the ocean with me." (12). Like any good transcendentalist, Ishmael suggests that beneath the surface differences among people, there exists a hidden,

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<sup>10</sup>Foucault, *The Order of Things*, 26.

<sup>11</sup>Emerson, *The Complete Works*, 4:261.

spiritual sameness.<sup>12</sup> Indeed, the first lines of the novel dismiss the importance of surface differences. The narrator refuses to make himself equal to the name Ishmael and to give his movement toward the sea a precise date. Even the particulars he lists afterwards are so numerous, sketchy, and uninteresting— frankly, he just seems broke and bored— as to suggest these too do not matter to one who knows how to penetrate surfaces and arrive at the truth. Like Emerson, Ishmael presents himself as such a person, in contrast to those (“If they but knew it”) who move about not knowing what they really want.

But if Ishmael is a transcendentalist, then he is a rather uncertain one. His declaration of the truth is full of doubt: not “all men,” but “almost all”; not “all the time,” but “some time or other”; not “the exact same feeling,” but “very nearly the same” and “in their own degree.” With all of these qualifications, are we tapping the truth or only noticing another layer of surface differences? We leave the first paragraph uncertain both of who Ishmael is and whether we are like him in wanting to go to sea.

Emerson demanded both freedom of self-constitution and obedience to an unchangeable law. Facing these contradictory demands, the narrator presents in the first paragraph a self that falls apart not because it is only a surface under which lies the true and universal trans-self, but because doubts haunt the hunt for a deep universal. The attempt to meet Emerson’s dual demands is repeated over the next five paragraphs, suggesting a dogged determination to make transcendentalism work. Again surface differences are ignored in favor of a deep universal. People may be clerks or robust healthy boys; landsmen from the north, east, south, or west; poor poets or romantic landscape painters—they all are drawn to the sea. Yet doubt again creeps in:

Let the most absent-minded of men be plunged in his deepest reveries— stand that man on his legs, set his feet a-going, and he will infallibly lead you to water, if water there be in all that region. Should you ever be athirst in the great American

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<sup>12</sup>See Irwin, *American Hieroglyphics*, 3-20.

desert, try this experiment, *if* your caravan happen to be supplied with a metaphysical professor. (13, emphasis mine)

Ishmael qualifies his claim that all are drawn to water by requiring a specific type of person, a "metaphysical professor," in order to make the experiment work. His "if" undermines the claim to universality, again suggesting the narrator's utterances are haunted by doubts about a universal depth.

The jaunty claim for using a professor as a water-detector may be read as an attempt to cover over that doubt. But the claim's outlandishness may also suggest the outlandishness of all articulations of a deep universal. Indeed, if we see the "metaphysical professor" as Emerson himself and recognize the narrator's transcendental drag, then we can note both the outlandishness of the promise to satisfy our thirst for a self founded deeply and the trick of leading us on with such a promise as a wild-goose chase. If we have missed that opportunity, we run the risk of reading the next paragraph, in which example after example cascades down, as an argument building to Ishmael's insistence that "Surely all this is not without meaning" (14). Yet the narrator presents us with another opportunity to see what he is doing. Questions, not statements, predominate in this paragraph, suggesting at least some doubt, and the berating tone points to how insistences on hidden meaning attempt to marshall us along.

But what if this is all without meaning? What if Ishmael has only constructed another false surface? The conclusion to the fifth paragraph suggests exactly this possibility:

And still deeper the meaning of that story of Narcissus, who because he could not grasp the tormenting, mild image he saw in the fountain, plunged into it and was drowned. But that same image, we ourselves see in all rivers and oceans. It is the image of the ungraspable phantom of life; and this is the key to it all. (14)

Ishmael calls upon us to penetrate beneath the not-quite-universal trait of seagazing to what Ahab will call in "The Quarter-Deck" the "little lower layer" (143). Alright, Ishmael seems to say, we may not share the universal trait of seagazing, but we all do stare at ourselves in

reflective surfaces. Less obviously than Ahab, Ishmael announces he is leading us through layers to depth and draws our attention to the consequences of being so led: like Narcissus, we become fixated and drown.

The reference to the Narcissus myth suggests what one sees in water is a surface image of the self. When we attempt to grasp this image, we assume that there is substance to it, that there is some sort of inner matter that fills it out, makes it graspable. By portraying the image of the self as "ungraspable," Ishmael implies that we are being lured in and captured by our expectation for deep, founded, meaningful selves. He begins to problematize our expectation by refusing to call the image we see in reflective surfaces ourselves. Instead, he calls it the "phantom of life," emphasizing its lack of substance.

"[L]ife" can be read here as the account of how one has lived. Writing such an account, as Ishmael is setting out to do in this text, demands that one suture together disparate acts by giving the reasons for those acts: Why did I consent to go to sea, to submit to that ship's style of association? The phrase "phantom of life" culminates the looming doubts about the ability to answer this question by suggesting that an explanation cannot be sutured together and that the failure results in a haunting impossible to comprehend fully. Outlandish suturings may be funny, but they can also turn scary, as what could not be sutured haunts Emersonian corporate individuals, making us as paranoid as Ahab. When we read these hauntings as deep, universal meaning, instead of reading them as the results of our own Renaissance and transcendental expectations, we are tricked into sublimely drowning in submission.

Finding that his dismissals of surface differences in favor of a deep universal have repeatedly failed to found anything but a very doubtful poetic self, Ishmael now gives us more particulars about himself and uses his own reasons for these particulars to tap into the deep universal. In explaining why, even though he is "something of a salt," he does not go to sea as anything but a "simple sailor," Ishmael says:

For my part, I abominate all honorable respectable toils, trials, and tribulations of every kind whatsoever. It is quite as much as I can do to take care of myself, without taking care of ships, barques, brigs, schooners, and what not. And as for going as cook, . . . I never fancied broiling fowls;— though once broiled, judiciously buttered, and judgmatically salted and peppered, there is no one who will speak more respectfully, not to say reverentially, of a broiled fowl than I will. It is out of the idolatrous doting of the old Egyptians upon broiled ibis and roasted river horse, that you see the mummies of those creatures in their huge bake-houses the pyramids. (14)

At first, Ishmael claims his particular choice is based on his own fancy. But this fancy finds a precedent among the ancient Egyptians, a group antebellum Americans saw as having been in closer contact with the meaning of life and Nature.<sup>13</sup> Thus this particular turns out to be a signature for the deep universal. As with the example of the water-detector professor, however, Ishmael's explanation should make us pause. The reader looking for a poetic self grounded in deep universals will hardly be satisfied by this portrayal of the great pyramids and curious mummies as representing Egyptians' respect for salted and broiled meat. Instead, that reader finds his expectation mocked and portrayed as outlandish. Furthermore, this articulation of the deep universal seems to reflect individual fancy rather than the other way around. Again, we peer into reflective surfaces only to find phantoms of our frustrated expectations.

Stranger still, Ishmael defines himself as a "salt" only to go on to talk about the salted fowls served on the ship, which he relates to the presumably salted mummies in their pyramids. Ishmael voices some real concerns here: that "simple sailors" become "salts" as they are consumed by others, such as the ship's officers and owners, but more particularly, by a public that looked upon sailors as bearers of the wonders of the world, much like the mummies that were being rapidly consumed by both American and European publics. The link between the sailor and the mummy reveals a danger in Ishmael constructing a poetic self for such a public. Narrators like as Ishmael were expected to offer themselves as both

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<sup>13</sup>See Irwin, *American Hieroglyphics*, 3-10.

exotic curiosities and bearers of secrets about death, the afterlife, and the mystical unity of Nature.<sup>14</sup> In the passage from *Pierre* cited as an epigraph to this essay, Melville most clearly doubts our ability to find these secrets. There, he expresses the fear that beneath all the surface wrappings lies nothing, not even a body that could be related to a former self. The mummy reference in "Loomings" also doubts our ability to find meaning in exotic curiosities. But more than that, the outlandish claim offered here mocks our archeological searches and Orientalist assumptions: pyramids symbolize bake houses and mummies, salted meat.

Ishmael continues to move from his particulars to his reasons for those particulars to a concluding deep universal. His utterances of a universal continue to be outlandish, as they appeal to a universal thump, "orchard thieves" (15), second-hand air, and flatulence. This jaunty tone ends when he tries to explain why he choose a whaling voyage rather than a merchant one. At first, he defers the explanation to the Fates and Providence. But then, again as a good-but-doubting transcendentalist, he claims to be able to see "a little lower layer":

[T]hough I cannot tell why this was exactly; yet, now that I recall all the circumstances, I think I can see a little into the springs and motives which being cunningly presented to me under various disguises, induced me to set about performing the part I did, besides cajoling me into the delusion that it was a choice resulting from my own unbiased freewill and discriminating judgment. (16)

The mummy passages in *Pierre* and "Loomings" had suggested that all those entombments and wrappings trick us into excavating pyramids. Here, the tricking reappears. Not only do the Fates "cunningly present[ ]" "springs and motives" under "various disguises" in

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<sup>14</sup>Sanborn describes the audience demands Melville faced after the success of *Typee* (*The Sign of the Cannibal*, 119-122). Dimock also discusses Melville's hostile relationship to an audience that preferred *Typee* to *Mardi*. Dimock argues that Melville imagined "a transcendent realm," "an island of immunity" where he could be "self-contained and self-sufficient" (*Empire for Liberty*, 110). I would argue that in "Loomings," Melville links this audience's expectations to transcendentalism and then mocks both in order to imagine a very different relationship to the self, others, and meaning in general.

order to get Ishmael to do what they want him to do, but they even "cajole" him into believing he himself decided to do these things "from [his] own unbiased freewill and discriminating judgment." As the "phantom of life" passage suggested, Emerson has turned paranoid here, a conversion anticipating Ahab. The deep universal not only leaves its signature all over nature, allowing intelligent transcendentalists to discover and submit to the truth from which we all have been removed, but it also plays confidence games.

Ishmael continues on, undermining the one assumption we might still feel safe making: he went to see the whale and therefore titles this book *Moby-Dick*. No, Ishmael says, the whale was only part of the con-game, one of the various disguises used to spring him into a whaling voyage.

Chief among these motives was the overwhelming idea of the great whale himself. Such a portentous and mysterious monster roused all my curiosity. Then the wild and distant seas where he rolled his island bulk; the undeliverable, nameless perils of the whale; these, with all the attending marvels of a thousand Patagonian sights and sounds, helped to sway me to my wish. . . .

By reason of these things, then, the whaling voyage was welcome; the great flood-gates of the wonder-world swung open, and in *the wild conceits that swayed me to my purpose*, two and two there floated into my inmost soul, endless processions of the whale, and, midmost of them all, one grand hooded phantom, like a snow hill in the air. (16, emphasis mine)

The paranoid transcendentalist claims to have been tricked by the very expectations readers of sea tales were placing upon their authors, the expectation that one will come in contact with the wonders of the world, including the possibility of violent death. He was lured onto a whaling voyage by the image of "the great flood-gates of the wonder-world" swinging open and whales floating into his "inmost soul," the wording of which suggests he had believed the whale would put his deepest self in contact with (again, so the Orientalist logic goes) the primal, ancient meaning of the world. As he shows in "Extracts," whales have long functioned in such images.

After mocking transcendental expectations of deep meaning and an Orientalist public's consumption of sailors as revealers of the world's wonders, Ishmael (like Ahab)

becomes a paranoid transcendentalist. This transformation suggests Emerson's deep universal tricks us into doing certain actions by presenting "conceits" or fanciful images. Yet a question remains: How can Ishmael be sure that at this moment he is seeing "a little into the springs and motives" presented to him "under various disguises"? Given that such disguises induce one to perform parts *and cajole* one into believing one is acting on one's "own unbiased freewill and discriminating judgment," how can he know he is not being deceived again, being tricked into thinking that he is seeing "a little lower layer"?

But by calling the conceit of the whale a "phantom," the closing words of "Loomings" returns us to Narcissus and the "image of the ungraspable phantom of life" he saw in the water. Narcissus's phantom resulted from the inability to suture the account of life that people expect from deep selves. Likewise, Ishmael's phantom results from the expectation that sailors come into contact with the wonders of the world, the images of the meaning of life and Nature that was known to the ancient Egyptians but is now buried deep in our selves and the natural world. Ishmael may blame the manipulative Fates, but he has also shifted his emphasis to surface images and how they capture us when we see them as foreshadowing the knowledge we are alienated from and as promising to completely satisfy us. By this point, Ishmael has emptied Emerson's deep universal of any meaning besides its role in getting us to chase it, an alluring phantom without substance produced by the failure to suture together a life for a deep self.

We can now understand Ishmael's jauntiness, which will continue throughout the narration. Ishmael has been reflecting back to us our (and his earlier) expectations in a mocking way. We should not be surprised by this, given the belligerence of the first two sentences, where he refuses to make himself equal to his name and dismisses our need to know precise dates. He has mocked our expectations to death, leaving phantoms that will haunt our and the younger Ishmael's hunts for deep meaning. But neither we nor the younger Ishmael will be haunted to death. Both Ahab and Ishmael are haunted by a "grand

hooded phantom" that results from Renaissance, transcendental, and Orientalist expectations. But Ishmael does not seek to annihilate this phantom; instead, he seeks a relationship with it. "Not ignoring what is good, [the younger Ishmael was] quick to perceive a horror, and could still be social with it" (16). The remainder of his narration will show both just how difficult it is to be social with this phantom and what style of association holds out the most promise for avoiding Emerson's (and Ahab's) sublime drowning in submission to a higher power. "Loomings" anticipates the answer. The older Ishmael of "Loomings" has made his narrative of his self and life into the reflective surface that trapped Narcissus, but he has also reflected back our expectations with such jauntiness and outlandishness that we have had opportunities to see as outlandish the expectations which trap and drown us. This, I will argue, is the strategy of coffin-ing, used by Peter Coffin and Queequeg, which saved the younger Ishmael from going down with Ahab's paranoid-transcendentalist hunt.

#### Traps and Quilts

"Loomings" has offered readers opportunities to see their transcendentalist expectations as outlandish. Selves are not grounded in a universal law to which they should submit and be (sublimely) led. Instead, people are moved by various conceits or fanciful ideas, which are nothing more than outlandish expectations. Indeed, the image of the deep self is such a conceit, leading us into archeological digs to uncover the buried or lost meaning of life and Nature — only to discover the surfaces dismissed as irrelevant or secondary are all there is. Such an argument suggests that when we read surfaces as foreshadowings, we become trapped into submitting to unmodifiable law, a submission we may see as sublime (Emerson) or paranoid (Ahab). The remainder of *Moby-Dick* explores how Ishmael comes to avoid these traps and to work differently with surfaces.

"The Carpet-Bag" portrays Ishmael as a paranoid transcendentalist reading signs as foreshadowings. He avoids the first two inns— "The Crossed Harpoons" and "The Sword-Fish"— because of their surfaces. This way of reading leads him to search the town archaeologically through "blocks of blackness . . . and here and there a candle, like a candle moving about in a tomb" (18). Upon knocking over an ash-box at the third building, Ishmael concludes he is entering the destroyed city of Gomorrah. In a paranoid-transcendentalist fashion, he concludes something is leading him into a trap: "But 'The Crossed Harpoons,' and 'The Sword-Fish?' — this, then, must needs be the sign of 'The Trap.'" However, I picked myself up and hearing a loud voice within, pushed on and opened a second, interior door" (18). Even though he imagines a sequence of images leading him into a trap, Ishmael nevertheless goes inside and thus submits to being led.

Ishmael finds there a "negro" congregation wailing in response to a fire-and-brimstone sermon, which would urge submission to an unmodifiable law. Because this form of submission is not presented in liberal form, he leaves. In "The Pulpit," however, he stays for Father Mapple's fire-and-brimstone sermon about Jonah and the whale. At the same stage of life as Ahab, Father Mapple represents the alternative the "mad" captain did not take: a retirement from whaling and a liberal submission to unmodifiable law. With all his maritime props and "truly sailor-like but still reverential" staging (42), Father Mapple in effect attempts to train outgoing sailors in liberal submission, which would help ensure the success of the corporate whaling venture. Ishmael finds the liberal submission presented here appealing because, unlike the negro church where submission is spectacularly portrayed as torture, Father Mapple portrays submission as replenishing, as "the meat and the wine of the word" (43). Father Mapple, Ishmael concludes, withdraws from worldly ties so he can better submit to unmodifiable law. Ishmael's transcendental expectations make him a captive audience for the sermon preaching submission to being led. Looking at the pulpit, which is shaped like the front of a ship, Ishmael asks himself, "What could be

more full of meaning? — for the pulpit is ever this earth's foremost part; all the rest comes in its rear, the pulpit leads the world" (43-4). Father Mapple's message is double: submit to your punishment (like Jonah) and preach the Truth to the face of Falsehood (like Mapple himself). This is also the dual message of Emerson: submission and radical individualism.

Upon entering The Spouter Inn, Ishmael repeats Jonah's entry into the whale, which was his spouting inn. According to Father Mapple, Jonah learned while in the whale to obey God and disobey himself. Jonah learned liberal submission. Unlike the congregation at the negro church, Jonah "[did] not weep and wail for direct deliverance"; instead, he "[left] all his deliverance to God, . . . not clamorous for pardon, but grateful for punishment" (49). Ishmael enters his "whale" with paranoid-transcendentalist expectation, but comes to different conclusions about signs than Jonah did. As with "Loomings," an older Ishmael steps forth to present before the action the relationship to signs that he has developed. Inside The Spouter Inn is a strange painting, which over the years, Ishmael has worked at understanding. Unlike the younger Ishmael who imagines a hidden universal beneath a surface that contains foreshadowing signatures, the older Ishmael sees the central element of this painting as part of the surface. After putting forth several interpretations, Ishmael states, "at last all these fancies yielded to that one portentous something in the picture's midst. *That* once found out, and all the rest were plain" (20). With the help of others, he creates a meaning for this something. Unlike Jonah (and Emerson), he does not submit himself to being led by this something, but rather makes his role in creating its meaning foremost. He arrives at a theory of his own, "partly based upon the aggregated opinions of many aged persons with whom [he has] conversed upon the subject" (20).

The rest of "The Spouter Inn" will show how the innkeeper, Peter Coffin, mocked the "green" Ishmael's paranoid-transcendentalist expectations. In response to Ishmael's paranoid questions about when his unknown bedmate will return, Coffin says he must be out peddling his head. Thinking that Coffin is telling him a "'bamboozing story,'" Ishmael

concentrates on whether this piece of information is true or false and thus misses how the landlord plays upon words in order to mock the young man's greenness:

"That's precisely it," said the landlord, "and I told him he couldn't sell it here, the market's overstocked."

"With what?" shouted I.

"With heads to be sure; ain't there too many heads in the world?"

"I tell you what it is, landlord," said I, quite calmly, "you'd better stop spinning that yarn to me — I'm not green."

"May be not," taking out a stick and whittling a toothpick, "but I rayther [sic] guess you'll be done brown if that ere harpooneer [sic] hears you a slanderin' his head."

"I'll break it for him," said I, now flying into a passion again at this unaccountable farrago of the landlord's.

"It's broke a ready," said he.

"Broke," said I — "broke, do you mean?"

"Sartain, and that's the very reason he can't sell it, I guess." (25-6)

After Ishmael gives a long sermon about the intimate connection shared with a bedmate, Coffin ends the joke, telling the young whaleman the harpooner is selling embalmed heads from New Zealand, which are great "'curios'" in England and America. Still a paranoid transcendentalist, worried only about being led along, Ishmael concludes Coffin had no intention of fooling him. Because Ishmael misses the lesson here, that one needs to "'be easy'" (26), as Coffin tells him, and engage in play instead of trying to determine whether one is being conned, the green whaleman falls for Coffin's next gag.

As Geoffrey Sanborn has argued, in the 1820s and '30s, "white" men were engaged in the business of selling embalmed heads as curios to other "whites."<sup>15</sup> Even the green Ishmael knows this and therefore concludes the harpooner must be a "white" man. After meeting Queequeg, Ishmael demands to know why Coffin did not tell him his bedmate would be a "cannibal." Since Queequeg is engaged in the cannibalizing trade of selling body parts, Coffin can rightly say, "'I thought ye know'd it;— didn't I tell ye, he was a peddlin' heads around town?'" (31). This punchline is funny because of the different ways Ishmael and Coffin use the word cannibal. Coffin uses it to refer to

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<sup>15</sup>Sanborn, *The Sign of the Cannibal*, 130-133.

Queequeg's business practices while Ishmael uses it to refer to his skin color.<sup>16</sup>

"Loomings" has offered readers opportunities to see their transcendentalist expectations as outlandish by mocking the belief that selves are grounded in a universal law to which people should submit and be (sublimely) led. Instead, "Loomings" shows how people are moved by various conceits or fanciful ideas, which are nothing more than outlandish expectations. Similarly, Coffin's gag depends on and mocks Ishmael's racist expectations, as the young whaleman is less bothered by cannibalizing business practices than by racialized skin. Ishmael can dismiss Queequeg's tattooing by arguing, "It's only his outside; a man can be honest in any sort of skin," but after observing more and more signs corresponding to a racialized skin, Ishmael becomes increasingly afraid of the "abominable savage" (29). When that skin is racialized as "non-white," then for Ishmael it begins to signify the quality of the person "inside," just as signatures in nature reveal the deep universal meaning of Nature. Struck dumb by his fear, Ishmael lies silently in bed, which brings about Queequeg's threat and Ishmael singing out for Coffin. Coffin's gag has mocked Ishmael's expectations and his reliance on expectations about the inside versus the outside of a human being, enough so that the young whaleman decides Queequeg is neither

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<sup>16</sup>See also Sanborn, *The Sign of the Cannibal*, 133-34. Sanborn's emphasis on Coffin's gag is slightly different than mine. He argues, "By dramatizing the personal and social fixation on the sign of the cannibal, Melville allows us to see that the word *cannibal* names a fantasy object against which self and society are defined. In Ishmael's panicked reaction, we witness the 'greenness' of those whose curious gaze stops too short," one that stops before realizing that the "whites" engaged in selling body parts as curios are cannibals and that, if one is comfortable with this, one should not be alarmed when one meets a "non-white" person engaged in the same kind of practice (133). Samuel Otter claims that Ishmael alters his evaluations of the "abominable savage" once Queequeg extinguishes the light and begins to feel him. See Otter, *Melville's Anatomies*, 160-61. Otter's claim, however, fails to recognize that Ishmael calls for Coffin and asks him why he had not told him "that that infernal harpooner was a cannibal" after Queequeg had felt him in the dark (Melville, *Moby-Dick*, 31). It is not touch detached from light and sight that alters Ishmael's opinion, but the exchange with Coffin. For a critique of critics' privileging of feeling in *Moby-Dick*, see Sanborn, *The Sign of the Cannibal*, 135-39. For Sanborn, "touch operates in *Moby-Dick* more as the rhetorical negation of the ethics of the spectacle [of the cannibal] than as a separate ethic in itself" (138).

abominable nor savage and that it is "[b]etter to sleep with a sober cannibal than a drunken Christian" (31). This use of the word "cannibal" shows Ishmael now uses it to refer to practices (here, religious practices) rather than racialized skin.

Coffin's gag offers an example of the practice I am calling coffin-ing. That Ishmael has at least temporarily learned from Coffin's gag is evident the next morning. Ishmael wakes to find his bedmate's arm lovingly thrown over him. He equates the tattooing on Queequeg's arm with the patchwork of the quilt. Taking words and signs to have only one translatable meaning, the green whaleman had read, in paranoid-transcendentalist style, the surface differences of Queequeg's arm as foreshadowing an inner meaning. In "The Counterpane," however, he not only recognizes the multiple meanings of words and signs, but also plays and creates new meanings with them, now that he is not looking for a deep, hidden meaning.

Queequeg's arm looks like the counterpane, and it allows Ishmael to *counter pain*, the pain he still feels over the memory of his stepmother isolating him from the family as punishment for imitating a chimneysweep. This punishment, along with the stepmother's tendency to whip him and send him to bed supperless, seems traumatic because it is the type of corporeal punishment often criticized in the antebellum era.<sup>17</sup> But more significant is the action for which Ishmael is punished. Unlike Narcissus (and, later, Ahab), who falls into the water in an attempt to unite with the phantom self produced by his own expectations, young Ishmael climbs up a chimney in imitation of a chimneysweep he had seen earlier. Young Ishmael is attempting to move from a narcissistic relationship of one to an identificatory relationship of two, a goal suggested by the comment that this event happened a little before *two o'clock* in the afternoon. That he is punished on "the 2<sup>nd</sup> June" suggests the problem with the form of punishment: it sends him back from a 2-

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<sup>17</sup>See Brodhead, "Sparing the Rod."

person to a 1-person relationship (32, emphasis mine). Upon waking in the middle of the night, young Ishmael confronts the result of his frustrated expectations of gaining a self through imitating another: a phantom whose hand he finds in his own. Just as Narcissus was captivated by the "image of the ungraspable phantom of life," young Ishmael is "frozen" by the phantom next to his bed (33). Attempting to grasp the ungraspable, the deep meaning held by the phantom, Narcissus loses himself and dies. Similarly, Ishmael had "lost [him]self in confounding attempts to explain the mystery" of that night, a mystery he has ever since tried to solve.

In New Bedford, Ishmael finds himself in a new bed, one in which he can bring himself to connect to what is beside him. Ishmael now re-creates the traumatic scene. Instead of a hand connected to a silent form, there is Queequeg's arm, which "affectionately]" embraces Ishmael (32), creating an atmosphere in which Ishmael can free associate, recreate meanings, and attempt to make a connection. Afraid to communicate with the phantom because earlier attempts at connections were rebuffed, the child Ishmael had become "frozen." Queequeg's arm, the design of which parallels the connections of patchwork, offers the connection and the counter to pain that the child Ishmael was looking for that night. Now, Ishmael "lay only alive to the comical predicament" of Queequeg's "bridegroom clasp" and successfully connects with the form attached to that arm when he attempts to rouse his bedmate (33). In "The Counterpane," then, Ishmael benefits from Coffin's gag and makes his first move towards leaving behind Narcissus's relation to phantoms and Emerson's transcendental hunts for deep meaning in favor of (re)creating meaning in the present by playing with words and signs.

The change in Ishmael is registered a few chapters later in the reversal of looking: "phantoms gathering round the casements, and peering in upon us silent, solitary twain" (53). This oxymoronic description ("solitary twain") shows how Ishmael and Queequeg have become like the counterpane, individual squares connected together in a "solitary

twain" patchwork. This relationship is not humanistic, for Queequeg is an image. He is a quilting together of signs of "racial others": the tomahawk-pipe of Native American tribes, the tattooing of Typeean Polynesians, the Ramadan of Moslems, and the embalmed heads of New Zealand Maoris. He represents both republican character, "George Washington cannibalistically developed," and philosophical isolation, the "calm collectedness of simplicity [which] seems a Socratic wisdom" (53). A quilt is potentially limitless, and Ishmael takes that potential seriously, seeing Queequeg as "sublime": "All this struck me as mighty singular; yet, upon second thoughts, there was something almost sublime in it" (52). For Ishmael, Queequeg is not an exotic curio, something "singular" that can be easily consumed, but "sublime" in his limitless solitary twainness. This representation attempts to work against colonialist discourse. Ishmael contrasts his opinion of Queequeg's sublimity with his earlier opinion of him as being like most savages. "But savages are strange beings," he had said; "at times you do not know exactly how to take them. At first they are overawing" (52). The "at times" and "[a]t first" in this earlier remark portrayed the savage as mysterious, but ultimately graspable. Now, Ishmael accepts his inability to grasp Queequeg and instead portrays him as a potentially limitless work of Ishmael's (and America's) expectations patched together.

Ishmael moves away from Narcissus, Emerson, and Ahab by changing his strategy from one of penetrating mysterious images in order to grasp the phantom of life to one of potentially never-concluded playing and creating with images to which one is "solitary twain." The self, then, is not a layered entity in which surfaces are important only in terms of signatures that indicate a deep universal truth; instead, the self is quilted to the images it helps create — indeed, it itself is such an image. Nor is the self moved by fanciful images or conceits this deep universal truth presents; instead, the self moves by creating and recreating the images to which it is already "solitary twain." Neither submissive nor radically individualistic, the self is always part of a potentially democratic group.

But something remains unsutured in the image from "A Bosom Friend"— the phantoms sitting outside watching. Joining with an other seems to have broken the fixation of Narcissus; the couple can sit silently and contentedly. But Ishmael is still being haunted by phantoms. Those phantoms have been pushed outside the household and marriage. This bifurcation will reappear in the character of Starbuck. Like Ishmael, Starbuck suffers from loss; he has lost both a father and a brother to whales. His idealized images of wife, child, and home have "embalmed [him] with inner health and strength, like a revivified Egyptian"— an image suggesting the monstrousness of this attempt to create some living thing where nothing should be and suggesting Starbuck's binarisms are the product of Emersonian archeological hunts (105). Yet Starbuck's bifurcation has also left him incredibly superstitious: "[o]utward portents and inward presentiments were his" (105). Split in this way, Starbuck is incapable of dealing with Ahab, and thus submits to being led by Ahab because outward forces seem to prescribe for the crew an unchangeable fate.

Because phantoms still haunt the scene of "solitary twain[ness]," Ishmael is left with much work to do. He will re-encounter images of what he still needs to deal with, but this time, qualities of himself appear externally, as if the quilt of the self has been rent into individual squares of fanciful images such as Starbuck (the bifurcation of "A Bosom Friend"), Ahab (the paranoid transcendentalist), and Bulkington (the "deep, earnest think[er]" [97]), all of which are elements of the Emersonian transcendentalism that supported corporate individualism.

#### The Personality and the "Personified Impersonal"

Ahab makes visible what is going on in the new association of the corporation. For the first few days of the Pequod's voyage, the power structure is similar to the corporation: the board of trustees is absent, the captain is hidden away, and the mates seem to be carrying out the orders of "their supreme lord and dictator" (109). The authoritarianism of

the ship's power structure is hidden by this hierarchy. Having heard predictions about Ahab, Ishmael is anxious about seeing him:

But whatever it was of apprehensiveness or uneasiness — to call it so — which I felt, yet whenever I came to look about me in the ship, it seemed against all warranty to cherish such emotions. . . . [I]t was especially the aspect of the three chief officers of the ship, the mates, which was most forcibly calculated to allay these colorless misgivings, and induce confidence and cheerfulness in every presentment of the voyage. (109)

Like Father Mapple's submission to God's punishments and the Truth, the mates' liberal submission, their cheerfulness and heroiness while "being under a troubled master-eye" (109), makes authority feel OK. Under universal submission, equality ceases to matter.

Ahab too is under the rule of his "one unsleeping, ever-pacing thought" (140), which "completely possess[es] him" (141). So commanded by this thought is he that he is frequently described as if he were the atmosphere, moved by the forces of Nature: "He looked not unlike the weather horizon when a storm is coming up" (141). Ahab's submission to this one thought and how that submission helps him control the corporation becomes clear in his appeal to Starbuck in "The Quarter-Deck." With little difficulty, Ahab has peppeped up his team to hunt the white whale. Starbuck attempts to undermine this pep talk, first by claiming it was not the infamous Moby Dick that took off Ahab's leg and second by pointing out that the hunt is contrary to the capitalistic goals of the corporation. Ahab appeals to the "little lower layer" in order to sway Starbuck to his wish. The captain first claims the death of Moby Dick will be profitable to one's inner self. Starbuck is unmoved and calls Ahab blasphemous for seeking revenge against a dumb brute, one who was only being a good corporate individual, following unmodifiable law in striking back at his pursuer.

Ahab again appeals to the "little lower layer" by portraying that unmodifiable law as his real antagonist:

"All visible objects, man, are but as pasteboard masks. But in each event — in the living act, the undoubted deed — there, some unknown but still reasoning thing

puts forth the mouldings of its features from behind the unreasoning mask. If man will strike, strike through the mask! How can the prisoner reach outside except by thrusting through the wall? To me, the white whale is that wall, shoved near to me." (144)

Seeing himself as captive to this power, Ahab wants not only to penetrate beneath surfaces in order to make contact with unmodifiable law, but also wants to get revenge upon it. He rejects Starbuck's portrayal of this act as blasphemous, arguing that turn-about is fair play. Here, Ahab has clearly not learned Father Mapple's first lesson: submit like Jonah to this power by accepting its punishment. Yet, he has learned the second lesson: "To preach the Truth to the face of Falsehood!" Therefore, he again changes the direction of his response to Starbuck and says, "'But not my master, man, is even that fair play. Who's over me? Truth hath no confines'" (144). In subordinating humanist standards of fair play to Truth, Ahab equates Truth both with the unmodifiable transcendental law (it has "no confines") and with Ahab himself ("me"). Ahab has merged with the transcendental law, and in Emersonian fashion, is both a defiant radical individual rejecting all laws not his own and a subordinate to unmodifiable law. Ahab, therefore, has no confines, except Truth, to which he is equal. The captain has fully adopted Emerson's dual lessons: one should be a radical, defiant individual, who rejects all laws not consonant with one's deepest self, and one should submit to one's deepest self which is nothing but the voice of unmodifiable law.

That Ahab's appeal is both liberal and corporatist becomes clear when he makes his fourth and final appeal to "'[t]he crew, man, the crew!'": "'Stand up amid the general hurricane, thy one tot sapling cannot, Starbuck'" (144). This works, and Starbuck gives in. The last appeal reveals how the appeal to the "little lower layer" is related to the corporation: both require one to submit to unmodifiable law. Unable to convince Starbuck that Ahab's law is consonant with his first mate's deepest self, Ahab reveals what is ultimately at stake here: the protection of the corporation's structure, regardless of whether

it is mobilized for capitalistic or the inner soul's profit. Because Starbuck splits the world into inner peace and outer portents of evil, he is unable to address how the very structure of the corporation, and not the workings of Fate, needs to be challenged.

Yet, there is a problem with Ahab's appeals. Ahab has portrayed transcendental Truth both as the force moving the whale, which he defies, and as the supreme law to which he will so submit that he becomes identical to it. Later, Ahab will say the "right worship is defiance" (416). That claim is anticipated here and the context of the corporation in "The Quarter-Deck" help us to understand it. Corporation requires charismatic personalities who appear to be true leaders worthy of following. Yet it also requires that everyone, including those leaders, submit to unmodifiable law. Even those in charge of the corporation (the board of trustees, the president, etc.) must submit to the larger body of shareholders, who in turn have no agency in the corporation except the purchase of stock. The leader is subordinate, yet must appear to be charismatic. This contradiction is resolved by Emerson in the Representative Man, who makes subordination defiant and makes radical individualism passive. Ahab takes the philosopher at his word and makes his subordination spectacularly defiant and his defiance spectacularly subordinate. Thus in "The Candles," Ahab says:

"thou clear spirit of clear fire . . . thy right worship is defiance. . . . I own thy speechless, placeless power; but to the last gasp of my earthquake life will dispute its unconditional, unintegral mastery in me. In the midst of the personified impersonal, a personality stands here. . . . [W]hile I earthly live, the queenly personality lives in me, and feels her royal rights." (416-17)

This conceit explains how Ahab can be both consonant with unmodifiable law and in defiance of it. The "queenly personality" here mediates Ahab's seemingly contradictory equation of defiance and subordination. The queen is defiant in demanding her "royal rights," presumably from the king who can "lauchest navies" and who is the personification of that country's impersonal law. Yet by limiting her demands to "royal rights," she subordinates herself to the impersonal law, one that makes a queen subordinate to a king.

Here, the right worship of the king is this defiance, a defiance that pays homage to the impersonal law that demands one's subordination to the king who personifies it.

Yet, by demanding her "royal rights," the queen does remind the king of his place: even he is subordinate to something else, the law he must personify. Therefore, Ahab reminds the power to which he speaks,

"Thou knowest not how came ye, hence callest thyself unbegotten; certainly knowest not thy beginning, hence callest thyself unbegun. I know that of me, which thou knowest not of thyself, oh, thou omnipotent. There is some unsuffusing thing beyond thee, thou clear spirit, to whom all thy eternity is but time, all thy creativeness mechanical. Through thee, thy flaming self, my scorched eyes do dimly see it. . . . [T]hou too hast thy incomunicable riddle, thy unparticipated grief." (417)

Ahab mocks the power he addresses as "thou omnipotent" by calling it a bastard. But more than that, he reminds that power it is different yet equal to Ahab. Its power is greater, but so is its puzzle, a puzzle similar to Ahab's: who is over me or is there naught beyond?<sup>18</sup>

Ahab's spectacularly subordinating defiance and his spectacularly defiant subordination in "The Candles" works in the same way as liberal corporatism: questions of equality are moot when all are subordinate to an "incommunicable" something. Ahab's performance of a personality works here as it does for the captain of a corporation. The crew is ready to raise a "half mutinous cry," yet instead of following Ahab's lesson of worshipping by defying, they abandon their defiance and settle for trying to avoid being hit by the pieces:

As in the hurricane that sweeps the plain, men fly the neighborhood of some lone, gigantic elm, whose very height and strength but render it so much the more unsafe, because so much the more a mark for thunderbolts; so at those last words of Ahab's many of the mariners did run from him in a terror of dismay. (418)

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<sup>18</sup>For a discussion of the gender politics of "The Candles," see Leverenz, *Manhood and the American Renaissance*, 279-306, especially 292-93.

Ahab's performance of a "queenly personality" demanding her "royal rights" has returned the crew to subordinating itself to the unmodifiable impersonal law personified by the Zeus-like power Ahab addresses, the law he claims makes "'your oaths to hunt the White Whale . . . as binding as mine'" (418). By creating an analogy between his relationship to the Zeus-power and the crew's relationship to him, Ahab makes his crew afraid of challenging authority in the way he does: only a great (or crazy) man defies and even that defiance is worship; the rest just get out of the way and dare not disturb the fiery captain of the corporation, who is busy with more important matters. Representative Men, men who are great in their representativeness and representative in their greatness, keep the corporation together by mediating the contradictory American demands for radical individualism and group unity.

In "Moby Dick," Ishmael notes that he was among the loudest of Ahab's supporters during the quarter-deck speech. "A wild, mystical, sympathetical feeling was in me; Ahab's quenchless feud seemed mine" (155). Like Father Mapple, Ahab holds a certain attraction for Ishmael. The captain is one of those conceits or fanciful ideas that move Ishmael, and therefore, Ishmael must work through that conceit in order to remake his relationship to structures of power. The chapter "Moby Dick" shows the similarity between Ishmael and the Ahab of "The Candles," suggesting Ishmael's attempt to understand is similar to Ahab's attempt to avenge. Just as Ahab presented the power he addressed as ruled by something the captain can only dimly see, Ishmael presents Ahab as a "deep m[a]jn" whose "Egyptian chest" contains a "hidden self" in which his "full lunacy . . . deepeningly contracted" despite surface appearances of calm (160-61). Ahab's conceit leads him on a hunt in which he both defies and subordinates himself to the power he addresses. The conceit of Ahab having an "Egyptian chest" full of secrets leads Ishmael on archeological digs:

This is much; yet Ahab's larger, darker, deeper part remains unhinted. But vain to popularize profundities, and all truth is profound. Winding far down from within the very heart of this spiked Hotel de Cluny where we here stand— however grand and wonderful, now quit it:— and take your way, ye nobler, sadder souls, to those vast Roman halls of Thermes; where far beneath the fantastic towers of man's upper earth, his root of grandeur, his whole awful essence sits in bearded state; an antique buried beneath antiquities, and throned on torsos! So with a broken throne, the great gods mock that captive king; so like a Caryatid, he patient sits, upholding on his frozen brow the piled entablatures of ages. Wind ye down there, ye prouder, sadder souls! question that proud, sad king! A family likeness! aye, he did beget ye, ye young exiled royalties; and from your grim sire only will the old State-secret come. (161)

Like Ahah's "queenly" conceit, Ishmael's conceit here is straight Emersonianism: truth has become buried and mocked over the ages, but still remains the unmodifiable law, the only giver of the State-secret; young would-he poets must seek out and listen to this truth and not that of the more recent "great gods." This state of affairs is encapsulated in the image of Ahah as a "deep m[a]n," one whose surface traits are attributed by most to his casualty at sea, an attribution that covers over the "little lower layer" of the hidden truth that moves him. Ishmael confesses that, while he knew there was a deeper reason, it required one "to dive deeper than Ishmael can go" (162); therefore, he "gave [him]self up to the abandonment of the time and the place" (163). The conceit of the "deep m[a]n" with the hidden "little lower layer" has gotten Ishmael to submit to the corporation.

#### "A Dumb Blankness, Full of Meaning"

In "The Try-Works," Ishmael disengages from Ahah's feud, and during the final days of the chase, he revises Pip's role as castaway. To understand how Ishmael makes these moves, it is necessary to look at what about Ahab and Ahab's quenchless feud captured Ishmael. The conceit of the "deep m[a]n" with the hidden "little lower layer" gets Ishmael to submit to the corporation. But why is a "little lower layer" so appealing? Why is Ahah's relation to the mysteries of life more captivating than those of the knights and squires? At the end of "Loomings," Ishmael confessed that the conceit that moved him to take a whaling voyage was the fanciful image of the whale, particularly the white whale,

swimming into his soul. This passage addresses both of the above questions. Ishmael has a problem with the color white because it signifies the "ungraspable phantom of life." He hopes to solve this problem by going on a whaling voyage because he imagines himself being able to fully grasp the white whale, an understanding symbolized by whales swimming into his "little lower layer," his "inmost soul." The ship's mates fail to offer Ishmael a way to deal with his doubts because each seems so naive in his inability to doubt. Ishmael finds a kindred spirit in Ahab, who also attempts to grasp the white whale in order to avoid doubts about phantoms.

The models offered by the three mates appear naive to the already-doubting Ishmael. Stubb's happy-go-lucky approach to his work, "taking perils as they c[o]me with an indifferent air; . . . toiling away, calm and collected," may be appropriate to "a journeyman joiner engaged for the year" (105), but not to the sailor engaged in the dangerous business of whaling for a much longer period of time. A journeyman joiner moves from one place of employment to another with little attachment to it or to the man in charge. The whaleman is closer to the emerging corporation man, whose loyalty to his place of employment is captured for years by a personality. Indeed, the very thing that keeps Stubb so easy-going, smoking his pipe, was fast becoming a leisure activity relegated to non-work time. Flask is likewise easy going, so that "a three years' voyage round Cape Horn was only a jolly joke that lasted that length of time" (106). Starbuck, as the ideal citizen of the republic, avoids doubts about the presence of nothingness through a brave sobriety, one anchored to land-lubber domesticity. Yet outside of that domestic space, Starbuck sees doom written everywhere. For him, the world outside the home is full of easy-to-read portentous signs. In this respect, he differs little from Ahab. But unlike Ahab, who offers Ishmael a model for quenching doubt by promising to grasp the ungraspable, Starbuck offers the republican model the narrator already mournfully doubts:

And brave as he might be, it was that sort of bravery . . . while generally abiding firm in the conflict with seas, or winds, or whales, or any of the ordinary irrational horrors of the world, yet cannot withstand those more terrific, because spiritual terrors, which sometimes menace you from the concentrating brow of an enraged and mighty man. (104)

However, the world to which the soberly brave republican is anchored is not purely good. The women writers most often associated with idealizing the home space were also, as Nina Baym observes, presenting homelife "overwhelmingly, as unhappy. There are very few intact families in this literature . . . and those that are intact are unstable or locked into routines of misery."<sup>19</sup> Ishmael has already shown how such settings are haunted by phantoms.

In "The Whiteness of the Whale," Ishmael describes people's relationship to white objects in a way that parallels liberalism's relation to the corporation: people both subordinate themselves to "the object of trembling reverence and awe" (165) and defiantly hunt this loathsome object that "repels and shocks" (166). This is Ahab's relationship to the power behind the white whale, the relationship that reimagines Emerson's dual command to be both a defiant radical individual and a subordinate to transcendental law: if one imagines transcendental law to be Power, then the right worship is defiance. Here, Ishmael accepts Ahab's view of the hidden something as "the demonism in the world" (169).

But Ishmael cannot ignore his doubts as easily as the Ahab who dismisses his thought that "'there's naught beyond'" the "'unreasoning mask'" (144). Ahab dismisses the whale's surface while Ishmael sees that surface as containing signatures revealing the hidden truth. For Ishmael, the intelligent person knows how to dismiss the other surface

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<sup>19</sup>Baym, *Woman's Fiction*, 27. Sailors would have been familiar with such reading material. Merton M. Sealts Jr. shows that the books on board the whaleship *Charles and Henry*, where Melville served in 1842, were predominantly sentimental (*Melville's Reading*, 66). He also argues Susanna Rowson's *Charlotte Temple* is among the reading material favored by Redburn's shipmates (*Melville's Reading*, 49).

colors as "deceits" and see in whiteness the signature indicating the foundation of meaning (170). The whiteness of the whale is "a dumb blankness, full of meaning" (169). The meaning he sees here is a significant nothingness, signified by other oxymorons, such as "the visible absence of color" and "the concrete of all colors," a "shadow[ing] forth [of] the heartless voids and immensities of the universe" (169). Having read "Loomings," the reader should see Ishmael's finding of an absence that is substantive as only the result of attempts to read something below the colorful surface of "all deified Nature" (170). The reader should question such ways of reading, whether that variation is Emerson's, Ahab's, or "the wretched infidel [who] gazes himself blind at the monumental white shroud that wraps all the prospects around him" (170).

At this early point in the voyage, however, Ishmael's conclusion leads to sympathy with Ahab: "And of all these things the Albino whale was the symbol. Wonder ye then at the fiery hunt?" (170), whether the hunt is an attempt to grasp through revenge or through understanding. Ahab's way captivates Ishmael because it offers the model of someone who has recognized and decided to do battle with that whiteness because he believes there is something there or rather because he can put aside his doubts that there is nothing there and continue to hunt as if there were. This is the comfortable relation to ideology that Slavoj Zizek describes as "they know that, in their activity, they are following an illusion, but they are doing it."<sup>20</sup> People do this because the illusion is not in the realm of knowledge but in our effective relationship to reality, in our way of doing things:

Ideology is not a dreamlike illusion that we build to escape insupportable reality; in its basic dimension it is a fantasy-construction which serves as a support for our 'reality' itself: an 'illusion' which structures our effective, real social relations and thereby masks some insupportable, real, impossible kernel (conceptualized by Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe as 'antagonism: a traumatic social division which cannot be symbolized'). The function of ideology is not to offer us a point of

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<sup>20</sup>Zizek, *The Sublime Object of Ideology*, 33.

escape from our reality but to offer us the social reality itself as an escape from some traumatic, real kernel.<sup>21</sup>

Ahab's model offers Ishmael the hunt, which keeps the sailor effectively related to reality structured as corporate individualism despite doubts that reality is only a deceit hiding a significant nothing.

Queequeg offers another model, one that is different both from Ahab's and from the quilting in "The Counterpane." In the early chapters of *Moby-Dick*, Ishmael's interaction with Queequeg had resulted in the conclusion that the self moves by creating and recreating the images to which it is already "solitary twain." Neither submissive nor radically individualistic, the self is always part of a potentially democratic group. The Queequeg of the early chapters drops out of the middle of the book because that fanciful image may have allowed Ishmael to finally respond to the problem of the phantom hand, but not to the phantom whale. At sea, the problem with the optimism of being solitary twain is intensified because that something outside of those images which one remakes and by which one is remade, that something that cannot be quilted, so often announces its presence in the form of spectacular accidents, misfortunes, and other workings of what one calls "Fate." In "The Monkey-Rope," one of the few sea-chapters where Queequeg appears, Ishmael discovers how the model of "solitary twain" fails to work. During "the tumultuous business of cutting-in" (270), Ishmael finds himself tethered to Queequeg, who is hanging over the side of the ship, standing on the whale's corpse, and attaching the rope that pulls off the blubber.<sup>22</sup> Ishmael perceives that his "own individuality was now merged in a joint stock company of two: that [his] free will had received a mortal wound; and that another's mistake or misfortune might plunge innocent [him] into unmerited disaster and death"

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<sup>21</sup>Zizek, *The Sublime Object of Ideology*, 45.

<sup>22</sup>The Norton Critical Edition of *Moby-Dick* illustrates this process on 517.

(271). No matter how well he handles his part of the rope, the pair can be killed at any moment, not only by the other's mistake, but also by "misfortune," something outside of and unrelated to what either handler is doing. Ishmael goes on to see this as the condition of all mortals.

The misfortune recognized in "The Monkey-Rope" is also present in the discussion of rumors in whaling life found in an earlier chapter, "Moby Dick." Here, Ishmael relates the rumors sperm-whale fishermen tell to account for "the surprising terrible events" in this branch of maritime life (156). Even among the sailors who are willing to hunt the deadly sperm whale, there are those who point to the immortal powers of Moby Dick to explain strange occurrences that cannot otherwise be explained. The sperm whale fishery is full of disastrous encounters between man and whale that seem something more than what a dumb brute is capable of: "those repeated disastrous repulses, all accumulat[e] and pil[e] their terrors upon Moby Dick" (156). Having made the White Whale the repository of the inability to explain "surprising terrible events," sailors construct "unearthly conceit[s]" about Moby Dick (158): that the creature is ubiquitous, immortal, not for mortals to hunt. The goal of these projections and conceits (or rumors) is wholeness, a completely sutured quilt of images that allows the sailors to grasp their experiences. Yet, Moby Dick is ungraspable, surviving attempts to grasp it through either revenge or understanding; after all, the whale survives.

This is because each conceit leaves something outside that remains. This situation fascinates Melville. In "Hawthorne and His Mosses" (1850), he writes, in "spite of all the Indian-summer sunlight on the hither side of Hawthorne's soul, the other side — like the dark half of the physical sphere — is shrouded in a blackness, ten times black. But this darkness but gives more effect to the evermoving dawn, that forever advances through it,

and circumnavigates his world."<sup>23</sup> Here he suggests that one moves through this world by creating conceits, but the illumination thrown by these conceits onto our experiences of the world is always haunted by a remainder or shadow, "the blackness of darkness beyond."<sup>24</sup> The great writer (Hawthorne, Shakespeare) is aware of this and of our desire to overcome this condition. In "The Sperm Whale's Head— A Contrasted View," Ishmael imagines the ability to overcome this remainder. The whale's eyes are positioned on the sides of its head. Therefore, it "must see one distinct picture on this side, and another distinct picture on that side; while all between must be profound darkness and nothingness to him" (279). Yet, Ishmael fancifully imagines the whale overcoming this blind spot:

[I]t is quite impossible for [a human], attentively, and completely, to examine any two things . . . at one and the same instant of time . . . But if you now come to separate these two objects, and surround each by a circle of profound darkness [as the whale's eyes do]; then, in order to see one of them, in such a manner as to bring your mind to bear on it, the other will be utterly excluded from your contemporary consciousness. How is it, then, with the whale? True, both his eyes, in themselves, must simultaneously act; but is his brain so much more comprehensive, combining, and subtle than man's, that he can at the same moment of time attentively examine two distinct prospects, one on one side of him, and the other in an exactly opposite direction? If he can, then is it as marvelous a thing in him, as if a man were able simultaneously to go through the demonstrations of two distinct problems in Euclid. (279-80)

Ishmael imagines the whale accomplishing the ungraspable ideal he arrived at in the early chapters: the ability to quilt together images of the world so that they are "solitary twain." Human's cannot do this, but perhaps the whale can. This "marvelous" state is what Ishmael, like all of us, desires. But we find this state as unattainable as doing two Euclidian proofs at the same time.

If Melville were the Hawthorne of "Hawthorne and His Mosses," he would stop at showing how a character like Ahab, Dr. Rappaccini, or Aylmer goes to extraordinary

<sup>23</sup>Melville, "Hawthorne and His Mosses," 540.

<sup>24</sup>Melville, "Hawthorne and His Mosses," 541.

lengths to avoid recognizing the inability to incorporate that "blackness of darkness." Or he would make Ishmael a Hawthorne (or a Young Goodman Brown or a Reverend Hooper) who "does not give us a ray of his light for every shade of his dark."<sup>25</sup> Instead, Melville shows how Ishmael recognizes both the "blackness of darkness" and the importance of rays of light. *Moby-Dick*, therefore, offers an ethics, one that affirms the importance of producing conceits or fanciful images, but also reminds us that any conceit necessarily leaves something out, something shrouded in darkness.

Two examples will suffice to show how Ishmael counters the Ahabian quest to grasp the ungraspable by producing fanciful images. In the midst of describing the rumors about and the awesome size of the white whale in "Moby Dick," Ishmael offers the following image:

The rest of his body was so streaked, and spotted, and marbled with the same shrouded hue, that, in the end, he had gained his distinctive appellation of the White Whale; a name, indeed, literally justified by his vivid aspect, when seen gliding at high noon through a dark blue sea, leaving a milky-way wake of creamy foam, all spangled with golden gleamings. (159)

This image reminds us that, like our imaginations, the light of high noon may illuminate certain aspects of the world with "golden gleamings," but in so doing, it also relegates other parts to "the blackness of darkness," in this case the "dark blue sea." Our imaginations (or the light of high noon) also produce the "vivid[ly]" white object. The image of a pure white whale is the conceit of the fullness that always eludes us. Yet this object is a product of our imaginations, as Moby Dick is not unrelieved whiteness, but "streaked, and spotted, and marbled." Here, Ishmael constructs a different conceit, one that reminds us that light always comes with dark — and vice versa. We see the difference between this

<sup>25</sup>Melville tentatively voices this criticism of Hawthorne, whose "blackness of darkness" might be "too largely developed in him" ("Hawthorne and His Mosses," 541). The Hawthorne characters referred to in the previous two sentences appear in the following tales: Dr. Rappaccini in "Dr. Rappaccini's Daughter," Aylmer in "The Birthmark," Young Goodman Brown in "Young Goodman Brown," and Reverend Hooper in "The Minister's Black Veil." See Hawthorne, *Nathaniel Hawthorne's Tales*.

ethics and Ahab's when Ishmael tries to portray the world as his captain saw it that day Moby Dick took off his leg:

Judge, then, to what pitches of inflamed, distracted fury the minds of his more desperate hunters were impelled, when amid the chips of chewed boats, and the sinking limbs of torn comrades, they swam out of the white curds of the whale's direful wrath into the serene, exasperating sunlight, that smiled on, as if at a birth or a bridal. (159)

What drives Ahab and the Ishmael of "The Whiteness of the Whale," both of whom are "desperate" for completion, is the unrelieved brightness of fullness— signified by the image of a birth or a bridal, conceits of individual pieces coming together in a couple or a child — a fullness from which they feel so alienated.

There are two dangers in Ishmael's construction of conceits, as in his image of "golden gleamings" cutting through a "dark blue sea." Ishmael is giving color to nature, a process he sees in "The Whiteness of the Whale" as the greatest deceit in that such coverings hide absolutely nothing. In creating an image of the dark that necessarily exists along with the rays of light we throw upon experience, Ishmael makes that nothing something, an image (a "dark blue sea") that is palpable, understandable. Ishmael creates another conceit for absence in "The Sphynx." After the crew has beheaded the whale it has caught, a castration that spectacularly produces part objects, Ishmael enjoys the silence: "Silence reigned over the before tumultuous but now deserted deck. An intense copper calm, like a universal yellow lotus, was more and more unfolding its noiseless measureless leaves upon the sea" (263). As John Bryant argues, Ishmael's utterance stands in stark contrast to the Shakespearean soliloquy Ahab gives upon encountering the dead silence of the whale's head: "'O head! thou hast seen enough to split the planets and make an infidel of Abraham, and not one syllable is thine!'" (264). Ahab imagines that he has come face-to-face with fullness and is exasperated at finding that it escapes him. Ishmael makes absence full, not with a tree of knowledge, as Bryant argues, but with a tree that bears a

fruit that causes indolence and dreamy contentment, a fantasy escape from desire and incompletion.<sup>26</sup>

In "Queequeg in His Coffin," Ishmael constructs a different kind of conceit for the dark that necessarily exists along with the rays of light we throw upon experience. As in earlier chapters, Ishmael portrays the confrontation with the unknown-ness of the darkness of blackness as a search through "catacombs" (395). When Queequeg descends into the hold to find a leaking cask, Ishmael imagines him coming into contact with the relics of ancient times, when people were in closer contact with the secrets of life now hidden from us. Ishmael imagines him going even further back, before language, humanity, and the split with Nature, portraying Queequeg as "crawling about amid that dampness and slime, like a green spotted lizard at the bottom of a well" (395). Ishmael portrays that contact with the darkness of blackness, that experience of the pre- or trans-human as a near-death experience, describing it as a "subterraneous confinement," suggesting a parallel with being buried alive (395). Coming out of the hold, Queequeg, like the decapitated head of the whale, seems to be in touch with the great mysteries. He too is silent, but whereas the silence of the whale's head had brought forth Ahab's eruptive soliloquy and Ishmael's soporific fantasy escape, Queequeg's eyes leave Ishmael in awe of that which escapes the living:

[L]ike circles on the water, which, as they grow fainter, expand; so his eyes seemed rounding and rounding, like the rings of Eternity. An awe that cannot be named would steal over you as you sat by the side of this wanng savage, and saw as strange things in his face, as any beheld who were bystanders when Zoroaster died. For whatever is truly wondrous and fearful in man, never yet was put into words or books. And this drawing near of Death, which alike levels all, alike impresses all with a last revelation, which only an author from the dead could adequately tell. (395-96)

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<sup>26</sup>Bryant, "Moby-Dick as Revolution," 85-9.

Ishmael hints at what was revealed to Queequeg: in death, everything is leveled so there is no desire, nothing is ungraspable because everything is collapsed into one. Yet Ishmael also recognizes the inability to express this in words and therefore appreciates the silence.

Queequeg does not die. In fact, Ishmael portrays him as living because he recognizes his desire, the precondition of living as a human being. “[T]he cause of his sudden convalescence was this,” Ishmael explains; “at a critical moment, he had just recalled a little duty ashore, which he was leaving undone; and therefore had changed his mind about dying: he could not die yet, he averred” (398). In this image, Queequeg offers a counter-conceit to Emersonian submissive corporatism. “[I]t was Queequeg’s conceit, that if a man made up his mind to live, mere sickness could not kill him: nothing but a whale, or a gale, or some violent, ungovernable, unintelligent destroyer of that sort” (398). This passage revises the paranoid-Emersonian, or Ahabian, image in “Loomings” that one is controlled by the Fates, who trick one into doing things and into believing in free will by presenting one with conceits. Here, Queequeg affirms a free will limited by uncontrollable disasters. But unlike Ahab, Queequeg does not imagine some reasoning thing controlling those uncontrollable disasters.

Most importantly, Ishmael recognizes here what was only hinted at in “Loomings”: his view of Queequeg’s convalescence is not a “seeing a little into,” but a conceit that depends on other conceits. Again Ishmael and Queequeg are “solitary twain,” as Ishmael creates a self by creating conceits that are influenced by, even as they influence, others’ creations of selves by creating conceits. Unlike his earlier image of such quilting, Ishmael recognizes in this chapter that something cannot be quilted and thus can rip quilts apart at any time. That something is the fullness symbolized by whiteness, which always eludes our grasp, leaving behind lack, the darkness of blackness.

It is at this point that Ishmael shifts from archeological images of the search for hidden meaning to surface creatings in response to what eludes us. Queequeg not only

decides to do something in response to desire instead of dying in order to avoid the ungraspable, but he also decides to create forms that represent this condition to others. On the surface of his coffin, he carves replicas of his tattoos. This tattooing, Ishmael tells us,

had been the work of a departed prophet and seer of his island, who, by those hieroglyphic marks, had written out on [Queequeg's] body a complete theory of the heavens and the earth, and a mystical treatise on the art of attaining truth; so that Queequeg in his own proper person was a riddle to unfold; a wondrous work in one volume; but whose mysteries not even himself could read, though his own live heart beat against them; and these mysteries were therefore destined in the end to moulder away with the living parchment whereon they were inscribed, and so be unsolved to the last. (399)

By replicating his tattoos, Queequeg preserves these hieroglyphics for posterity. Like the hieroglyphics that fascinated antebellum America and Europe, viewers will attempt to translate them. Despite Jean-François Champollion's translations of Egyptians hieroglyphics with the aid of Rosetta stone in the 1820s, Ishmael holds out no hope that Queequeg's riddle will be unfolded.<sup>27</sup> Instead, Queequeg's will remain a reminder that humans are forever barred from "attaining truth."

Ahab sees this artwork, and as he did with the mute whale's head, exclaims, "'Oh, devilish tantalization of the gods!'" (399). Ahab's attitude keeps him subordinate to "the gods," submitting with the right worship of power, which is defiance. Similarly, Pip recognizes his alienation from completion, from both the indifferent "God-omnipresent" and "the infinite of his soul" (347). In response, Pip becomes the corporate man writ large, pledging his submission to his unchangeable captain, which results in Pip going down with the ship. Pip's response is "heaven's sense," as one supposedly gains completion in heaven by submitting to an unchangeable god, but it is "man's insanity" (347).

Queequeg offers an alternative, submitting only to accident and natural disaster and seeing all else as an occasion for creation. Pip too sees this as an alternative. He is ready

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<sup>27</sup>See Irwin, *American Hieroglyphics*, 3.

to make himself a slave as punishment for dying a coward ("if ye find Pip, tell all the Antilles he's a runaway"), but he champions Queequeg for dying game (398). After those words from Pip, Queequeg rouses and remembers he still can do something.

Ishmael, however, does not make Ahab's exclamation.<sup>28</sup> Nor does he attempt to escape into "copper calm" dreams of contentment. And he avoids Pip's subordination to the corporation when he revises the role of the castaway who sees terrible things; unlike Pip, Ishmael creates something, *Moby-Dick*. Overall, Ishmael imitates Queequeg. In "A Bower in the Arsacides," Ishmael has the measurements of the whale's skeleton tattooed on his right arm. Because "the skeleton of the whale is by no means the mould of his invested form" (377), these tattooings mean about as much as Queequeg's: they cannot be translated into anything that would grasp the elusive (whale), but instead serve as a reminder of that ungraspability. "How vain and foolish, then, thought I, for timid untravelled man to try to comprehend aright this wondrous whale, by merely poring over his dead attenuated skeleton, stretched in this peaceful wood. . . . [O]nly on the profound unbounded sea, can the fully invested whale be truly and livingly found out" (378). As the titles of the cetology chapters show, even there full comprehension slips away and one is left with partial conceits about the whale.

<sup>28</sup>My reading of Ishmael's relationship to Queequeg's coffin-carvings differs from Otter's. His conclusions about Melville's relationship to ideology depend upon his reading of "Queequeg in His Coffin." Otter argues that when Ishmael looks at Queequeg's tattooings, he "contemplates a figure of another race, conceived as essentially different and wishes to see deeply" (*Melville's Anatomies*, 167). I would argue that in this chapter, Melville shows Ishmael revising such fantasies of the savage "seeing deeply" as the chapter moves from archeological imagery to surface creations. At the end of the chapter, Ishmael recognizes that the "savage" too is barred from "seeing deeply." It is Ahab, not Ishmael, who fights this realization. Otter argues otherwise, claiming the words "'Oh, devilish tantalization of the gods!'" can be read as being said by Ahab, Ishmael, or Melville. I would argue that the preceding words "it must have been [this tattooing] which suggested to Ahab that wild exclamation of his" and that the quotes around the exclamation limit the speaker to Ahab (Melville, *Moby-Dick*, 399, emphasis mine). One can compare these ties to a specific speaker to the lack of such in "The Gilder," where the speaker of the "Oh, grassy glades!" speech is much more ambiguous (see Melville, *Moby-Dick*, 406). Bryant gives a fine reading of this ambiguity. See Bryant, "Moby-Dick as Revolution," 86-7.

In "The Whiteness of the Whale," blankness terrified Ishmael, who saw all of nature's colorings as deceits that were attempting to hide nothing. After portraying Queequeg's tattoos as signs of a fullness that is forever barred to us, Ishmael adopts Queequeg's relationship to the lack that is part of the human condition. Like Queequeg who adorns his blank and empty coffin, Ishmael sees blankness as an occasion for creating. The narrator reveals that he, the older Ishmael who stars in "A Bower in the Arsacides," was becoming heavily tattooed and thus "crowded for space; he [had been] reserving certain parts of his body as "a blank page for a poem [he] was then composing" (376). Ishmael's willingness to create, rather than grasp, unhooks him from Ahab's paranoid-Emersonian chase and from the corporation Ahab holds together with his "queenly personality." The importance of Queequeg's coffin in Ishmael's transformation is made clear in the "Epilogue," where he is saved by the "great buoyancy" of the oxymoronic "coffin life-buoy" (470). Ishmael too has learned to be buoyant (or, in Peter Coffin's words, "easy"), playfully creative, and even oxymoronic in response to the substantive nothingness that is necessarily part of the human condition and to the completion that always eludes our grasp. Rather than drown in submission to unmodifiable law, Ishmael too will die game.

#### Conceits and Confidence Games

One can now understand the roles of Queequeg, Ahab, and the whale in this novel. Each is tattooed and hieroglyphical. Given the Orientalist assumptions shared by American and British audiences at the time, the tendency is to translate these hieroglyphics into the deep universal meanings of life and Nature that were known to the Egyptians but lost to modern times, buried under layers of culture. Ishmael's attempts to grasp the deep meanings lying under these figures are always frustrated. Optimistic philosophers, such as Emerson, portrayed attempts to grasp the deep universal as possible for the great poet.

According to Emerson, the great poet needs to rely on what he knows from within, which in turn must give way to him accepting his place in his age, which in turn needs to give way to his locating the source of insight beyond his contemporaries in "transcendent destiny." For Emerson, all three of these steps are consistent because the foundation of one's self and the true place one should assume in society is determined by the deep universal, "transcendent destiny." Therefore, the great poet is both a radical individual and a subordinate to unmodifiable law because in Emerson's scheme defiance and obedience become the same thing. Ahab spectacularly enacts this process for his crew, presenting a "queenly personality" that represents worship and defiance of the "personified impersonal" as being the same thing. Ahab's act puts the crew members in their places in the ship-corporation. He is the great Representative Man to whom one should submit because his personality represents the right relationship to power, one that mediates between the competing demands (for Americans) for both radical individualism and group unity.

Ultimately, Ishmael develops a different relationship to power. He comes to see the archeological searches for the deep universal as doomed: such a find is forever barred to human beings and therefore we must create a new relationship to lack. This new relationship is the novel *Moby-Dick*, where Ishmael creates various conceits or guises, such as Ahab, the knights and squires, and the Queequeg of the early chapters, in order to create other conceits, such as the Queequeg of the later chapters, his coffin life-buoy, and Ishmael himself. These images are quilted to one another, but there is always something outside that cannot be quilted: the phantom missing piece that, if grasped, would yield completion. That piece is represented in the image of the white whale, Moby Dick. By representing what eludes representation, Ishmael portrays that missing piece as graspable. But as he discovers, the white whale cannot be grasped: it escapes both Ahab's vengeful hunt and Ishmael's cetological claims. The inability to grasp this piece results in another figure, the tattooing on Queequeg and his coffin. Ishmael does not try to grasp these hieroglyphics;

instead, he stands in wonder before that to which he is barred access. But Ishmael does not subordinate himself to this the way Ahab does with his "right worship." Instead, he too creates, both by tattooing his skin with the measurements of the whale and with a poem he is composing and by producing a self ("Call me Ishmael") through *Moby-Dick*.

In his 1857 novel, *The Confidence-Man*, Melville proposes how Ishmael's relationship to the ungraspable can contribute to a politics different than the liberal politics of reform. As seen in the Emersonian three-step, liberal reform seeks to put people in their proper places by remaking their characters so that they are consonant with the corporation, the dominant solution to the conflict between radical individualism and group unity. *The Confidence-Man* rejects this politics by rejecting its archeological, Orientalist appeals to subordinating oneself to unmodifiable law. When in *The Confidence-Man* the Emerson-like character, Mark Winsome, makes such an appeal, the cosmopolitan, Frank Goodman, interrupts, "Pray now . . . why disturb the repose of those ancient Egyptians? What to us are their words or their thoughts? Are we pauper Arabs, without a house of our own, that, with the mummies, we must turn squatters among the dust of the Catacombs?"<sup>29</sup>

Melville counters Emerson's corporate-liberalist reforms with a politics of confidence games. To emphasize that these games attempt to work on social problems, Frank Goodman offers the story of Charlemont, who says about his own life:

"If ever, in days to come, you shall see ruin at hand, and, thinking you understand mankind, shall tremble for your friendships, and tremble for your pride; and, partly through love for the one and fear for the other, shall resolve to be beforehand with the world, and save it from a sin by prospectively taking that sin to yourself, then will you do as one I now dream of once did, and like him will you suffer."<sup>30</sup>

<sup>29</sup>Melville, *The Confidence-Man*, 229.

<sup>30</sup>Melville, *The Confidence-Man*, 221. The story of Charlemont has affinities with Hawthorne's "Wakefield," which concludes:

He has left us much food for thought, a portion of which shall lend its wisdom to a moral, and be shaped into a figure. Amid the seeming confusion of our mysterious world, individuals are so nicely adjusted to a system, and systems to one another,

That the story of Charlemont speaks to Goodman's own life becomes clear when the latter asks his listener, Charlie:

"I rest it with your own heart now, whether such a fore-reaching motive as Charlemont hinted he had acted on in his change — whether such a motive, I say, were a sort of one at all justified by the nature of human society? Would you, for one, turn the cold shoulder to a friend — a convivial one, say, whose pennilessness should be suddenly revealed to you?"<sup>31</sup>

Charlie had just turned a cold shoulder in response to the cosmopolitan's request for money. Earlier, in response to Goodman's statement that his request was just a joke, Charlie replied that he too was playing a part, not wanting to ruin a good joke. The cosmopolitan notes that Charlie played his part "to the life."<sup>32</sup> By then telling the story of Charlemont and asking Charlie whether the world is such a place that calls for Charlemont's sin, Goodman reveals why he (if, indeed, he is one of the incarnations of the confidence man/men) plays confidence games. People like Charlie are more than willing to play roles, particularly ones in which they claim to have great confidence in mankind, but they play "to the life," take as their "real" selves, the role of the cynic or doubter. By engaging in confidence games, the confidence man takes upon himself the sin of cheating people out of their money (though only enough to make the game work and then he often donates the winnings to charity) in order to save the world from its cynicism and lack of charity.

Even when he fails to win confidence — as is the case with Charlie, the Thoreau-like Egbert, and ultimately the barber — the cosmopolitan disturbs their distrust by

and to a whole, that, by stepping aside for a moment, a man exposes himself to a fearful risk of losing his place for ever. Like Wakefield, he may become, as it were, the Outcast of the Universe. (Hawthorne, *Nathaniel Hawthorne's Tales*, 81-2)

<sup>31</sup>Melville, *The Confidence-Man*, 222.

<sup>32</sup>Melville, *The Confidence-Man*, 216.

confounding their belief that they can know either their companions, whom they deem worthy of trust, or themselves: Charlie is flustered and leaves after the cosmopolitan's question, Egbert is at a loss to determine where exactly the fictitious character had been dropped, and the real one, if any, resumed, and the barber remains in wonder of the cosmopolitan's ability to charm him into taking down his "No Trust" sign. The cosmopolitan and the confidence man (or men) more generally works to return those stuck to "real" selves that doubt by returning them to the play of unfounded and inconsistent selves, to the play of (and enjoyment in) confidence games.<sup>33</sup> Once Ishmael rejects Emerson's archeological hunts and Ahab's paranoid view of Fate playing confidence games, he too engages in such play, inventing the self of Ishmael and getting us readers to play along and call him Ishmael as he mocks our Emersonian expectations as outlandish while encouraging us to create something that reminds others of that from which we are forever barred.

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<sup>33</sup>[I]t is in this sense of changing the world that Melville's confidence man/men is closer to P.T. Barnum than to other such incarnations in American literature, such as Huck Finn and Horatio Alger, who engage in confidence games in order to ensure survival for themselves and/or their friends rather than to change the relationships among people.

CHAPTER 4  
SNEAKING AROUND:  
IDEALIZED DOMESTICITY, IDENTITY POLITICS  
AND GAMES OF FRIENDSHIP IN NELLA LARSEN'S *PASSING*

Homes, more homes, better homes, purer homes is the text upon which sermons have been and will be preached.

—Mary Church Terrell<sup>1</sup>

My point is not that everything is bad, but that everything is dangerous, which is not exactly the same as bad. If everything is dangerous, then we always have something to do. So my position leads not to apathy but to a hyper- and pessimistic activism.

I think that the ethico-political choice we have to make every day is to determine which is the main danger.

—Michel Foucault<sup>2</sup>

The Politics of Safety

During the post-Reconstruction era, novels by African-American women often centered around attaining and advancing idealized domesticity. In response to the dangers of segregation, these novels portrayed "black" heroines who, as models of the genteel standard of Victorian conduct, undergo a series of adventures en route to marriage, family happiness, security, and prosperity. Such novels, Claudia Tate argues, attempted not only to counter racist rhetoric, but also to sustain their readers' faith in the struggle for freedom and "racial" advancement by using the tropes of domesticity to provide allegories of

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<sup>1</sup>Quoted in Knupfer, *Toward a Tenderer Humanity*, 19. Mary Church Terrell was the first president of the National Association of Club Women, which played a vital role in activism against Jim Crow laws and lynching.

<sup>2</sup>Foucault, "On the Genealogy of Ethics," 256.

"political desire in the form of fulfilled (rather than frustrated) liberational aspiration."<sup>3</sup> The success of these novels arose "from their ability to gratify vicariously that readership's desire for racial equality and female agency in the creation and maintenance of happy, productive families."<sup>4</sup> While the domestic ideal of the post-Reconstruction-era novelists may have given many African-Americans hope when their civil rights were constitutionally sanctioned but socially prohibited, one still needs, as the above quotation by Michel Foucault reminds us, to engage politically and critically with this response in order to attend to the new dangers that came along with it. In order to create an idealized domesticity, novelists and social activists like Mary Church Terrell engaged in the task of showing others their "proper" places in respect to the domestic ideal of "purer homes." While post-Reconstruction novelists and activists attempted to counter the rhetoric and the effects of segregation, they did so by appealing to the same fantasy as segregationists and eugenicists, the fantasy that if everyone could be shown and made to stay in his or her "proper" place, all domestic problems — both in terms of the nation and the home — would be solved.

Because Clare, the figure who leaves the "proper" place marked out for her by both segregationists and post-Reconstruction novelists and activists, is dead at the end of Nella Larsen's *Passing*, the novel would seem to be offering a narrative supporting this project, one that shows the dangerousness of sneaking around outside of "racial," class, and domestic boundaries.<sup>5</sup> In this reading, the novel would seem to follow in the tradition of

<sup>3</sup>Tate, *Domestic Allegories*, 68.

<sup>4</sup>Tate, *Domestic Allegories*, 96.

<sup>5</sup>Ammons, perhaps Clare's harshest critic, reads the novel in this way, arguing that while Clare has "moved out of African American bourgeois culture" and "roams free of its demands for conformity and social service and endless attention to familial and community uplift," she has only gained a "hollow and self-destructive" freedom. See Ammons,

*Nigger Heaven*, the novel by Larsen's close friend Carl Van Vechten, which offers a narrative of an energizingly attractive but nevertheless dangerously destructive cabaret nightlife. By describing this nightlife as the essence of "blackness," Van Vechten creates a new group of vanishing Americans, ones destined to lead ruined lives because of the "exotic" dangers to which they are "naturally" drawn. Even though characters in *Passing* often parallel characters from *Nigger Heaven*, Larsen avoids Van Vechten's equation.<sup>6</sup> Whereas Van Vechten shows how his characters are torn apart by "all the incongruities, the savage inconsistencies, the peculiar discrepancies, of this cruel, segregated life," Larsen represents in Clare someone who uses and finds pleasures in these "discrepancies" and "inconsistencies."<sup>7</sup> That Clare is dead at the end of the novel speaks not only to the dangers of her way of life— everything is dangerous—but primarily to the murderous logic of Irene's attempt to create a "pure" home-as-safe-haven.

In Clare, Larsen not only avoids Van Vechten's equation, but also avoids post-Reconstruction novelists' and activists' reliance on proper places in identity politics.<sup>8</sup>

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*Conflicting Stories*, 191.

<sup>6</sup>Note the similarities between Larsen's Irene and Van Vechten's Mary, between Larsen's Clare and Van Vechten's Lasca and Adora, and between Larsen's Brian and Van Vechten's Byron. In Dick Sill, Van Vechten also creates a passing figure who, like Clare, plays upon the inconsistencies of segregated life in order to get what he wants, but he is a minor character, an alternative offered to but rejected by Byron. Larsen dedicated *Passing* to Carl Van Vechten and his wife, Fania Marinoff. For a recent interpretation of the relationship between Van Vechten and Larsen, see Hutchinson, "Nella Larsen and the Veil of Race," 343-4. Hutchinson criticizes Davis's treatment of the relationship in her biography, *Nella Larsen, Novelist of the Harlem Renaissance*.

<sup>7</sup>Van Vechten, *Nigger Heaven*, 215.

<sup>8</sup>I would disagree with McDowell's claim that since Larsen was a friend of Van Vechten's and part of the racial "uplifters," she attempted "to hold these two virtually contradictory impulses in the same novel" (Introduction, xvi). Instead, I would argue that *Passing* criticizes both positions and comes up with something else, something that plays upon the contradictions created by the two impulses of the Harlem Renaissance.

These novelists and activists attempted both to arrange others according to class and color and to display them to the public sphere's adjudicating gaze, particularly in the creation of "better" and "purer" homes.<sup>9</sup> In the process, they both relied upon and produced normative identity categories that served a disciplinary system of "race," class, gender, and sexuality. In the character of Clare, Larsen shows how to pleasurable use these categories in such a way that confounds them. Yet for a while now, critics of the novel, in their reliance on identity categories, have expended most of their energy in showing Larsen and her characters their proper places.<sup>10</sup>

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Therefore, I would agree with DuCille's argument that "[f]ar from merely denigrating the folk and championing the black middle class, . . . Larsen actually critiqued both the pretensions of the black bourgeoisie and the primitivism assigned the transplanted urban masses" ("Blue Notes on Black Sexuality," 422). However, I would disagree with DuCille's claim, which follows the majority of critics, that "Clare and Irene—the exotic and the elite—may represent the dialectics of the renaissance moment itself" (438). My reading suggests these characters cannot so easily represent sides of a dialectic.

<sup>9</sup>Recall Du Bois's prescription that "social distinctions be observed" by the talented tenth (qtd. in Knupfer, *Toward a Tenderer Humanity*, 21).

<sup>10</sup>Ramsey ("A Study of Black Identity"), Ammons (*Conflicting Stories*), and Wall ("Passing for What?") criticize Clare and Larsen for departing from their "true" "black" identities, arguing that the novel's ending shows the dangers of such a departure. McDowell's influential reading of the novel (Introduction) as a coded narrative of repressed lesbian desire has been followed by Rabinowitz ("Betraying the Sender") and Johnson ("Lesbian Spectacles"), who likewise have defined—without qualification—the charged relationship between Clare and Irene as "lesbian." Brody ("Clare Kendry's 'True' Colors") criticizes Irene for trying to escape from "racial" and working-class consciousness and praises Clare for remaining a "determined lower-class Black girl" (1061-2). Many critics have claimed that Irene and Clare are two halves of one whole and that, in the words of Davis, "each route, isolated without the tempering force of the other, is destructive, and neither arrives at creative self-expression" (*Nella Larsen* 321); such a claim follows in the tradition of directing the characters and readers to what a proper identity would be.

Hutchinson ("Nella Larsen and the Veil of Race") finds Davis's and Larson's biographies perpetuating the tradition of Larsen scholarship where the "drama of biracial subjectivity is forced to fit within more easily recognized patterns or is explained on the grounds of normative assumptions that serve a dualistic disciplinary system of race" (332). Hutchinson concludes that we need to take into consideration Larsen's "biracial" and "bi-ethnic" identity. What goes unexamined, however, is whether a "biracial" or "Danish-American" identity also serves a disciplinary system of race and ethnicity by simply adding another other. More recently, in her introduction to the Penguin edition of *Passing*, Davis

*Passing* shows idealized domesticity and identity politics to have been dangerous responses to segregation. The novel chronicles a tumultuous year, beginning when Irene accidentally meets her childhood friend, Clare, and ending when Irene pushes Clare out of the Freelands' apartment window because she suspects her friend is having an affair with her husband, Brian. In between, the narrative offers intense and complex encounters between Irene and Clare, which take place around the issue of passing, both in the sense of "racial" passing and "sneaking around." These encounters show Irene both identifying and disidentifying with Clare and problematize Irene's stubborn belief in the safety of "black" middle-class home-life. These encounters between Irene and Clare offer a model for a push-and-pull game of friendship as a practice of freedom, a model that responds to both the dangers of segregation and the dangers of identity politics and idealized domesticity.<sup>11</sup> After discussing how Larsen's novel portrays the appeal to idealized domesticity as a dangerous response, which she criticizes by using the language of slavery, I will turn to a larger discussion of disciplinary positioning and finally to these complex encounters, concluding with a discussion of how the model of friendship offered here may be useful in

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has written about Irene and Clare as having biracial (and bisexual) identities. Her introduction offers an excellent discussion of the pressures and possibilities those who were passing faced in the 1920s due both to new economic opportunities for a "black" middle-class and to the collapse of all shades of "whiteness."

<sup>11</sup>In using the word "friendship," I am referencing Foucault's use of it in "Friendship as a Way of Life," specifically his discussion of S&M as a pleasurable game of strategic moves. Therefore, I am not denying that Irene and Clare's relationship can be seen as having a certain queer libidinal investment; rather, I will be trying to describe that libidinal investment in terms of a pleasurable but problematizing game of push and pull. While this reading recognizes McDowell's (Introduction), Johnson's ("Lesbian Spectacles"), Rabinowitz's ("Betraying the Sender"), and Butler's (*Bodies That Matter*) claims that Irene and Clare's relationship is one of repressed lesbian desire, it attempts to avoid the identity naming that all but the last of these critics rely on, by preferring to keep the relationship open to other significations by using the word "friendship," an openness I hope to show as being useful for responding to what is dangerous now.

responding to today's dangerous appeals to the "safety" of idealized domesticity and identity categories.

#### Idealized Domesticity

As Tate argues, the post-Reconstruction response to segregation by African-American women novelists attempted to shore up and expand the "black" heterosexualized middle-class home as a *cordon sanitaire*. By the time Larsen was writing, Tate notes, the frustrated optimism of the post-Reconstruction era had given way to despair, and the confidence in the ability of bourgeois respectability to triumph over racism became — in the works of Angelina Weld Grimké, for example — the impossibility of a successful marriage and happy family because of racial conflict. Nella Larsen's *Passing* responds to the dangers of the bourgeois domestic ideal championed in the post-Reconstruction novels by portraying Irene's attempt to sustain the fantasy of idealized domesticity's safety as dependent on "enslaving" those whose conduct she must keep genteel and on exterminating those who create resistance to her plans.

Irene shares the post-Reconstruction faith that adopting middle-class values will secure the protections and promises of the Reconstruction Amendments. Irene finds these values exemplified in the Frelands and their home. Because their top-floor apartment "discourages the casual visitor," it offers a refuge from the sweaty masses Irene had found so bothersome and dangerous in Chicago, where she almost fainted from contact with them.<sup>12</sup> Felice and Dave Freland themselves represent the accomplished "talented tenth" after whom Irene tries to model her and Brian's lives. Their charm, accomplishments, and top-floor home represent the goals of the post-Reconstruction novelists and readers: the

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<sup>12</sup>Larsen, *QUICKSAND and PASSING*, 236. In the future, quotations from this text will be cited internally by page number alone.

attainment of a "freeland" redefined from the one about which the slave spirituals used to sing.

But the Freelands are not immune to the kinds of dangers Irene fears. When Bellew invades the Freelands' home to "expose" Clare as "'a damned dirty nigger'" (238), their sixth-floor apartment keeps out neither him nor the violence he sets in motion. Nor do Dave's accomplishments, "devastating irony," and status as "the husband of Felise Freeland" provide immunity from Clare's charms:

Before [Irene's] tired eyes Clare Kendry was talking to Dave Freeland. Scraps of their conversation, in Clare's husky voice, floated over to her: "... always admired you . . . so much about you long ago . . . everybody says so . . . no one but you . . ." And more of the same. The man hung rapt on her words, though he was the husband of Felise Freeland, and the author of novels that revealed a man of perception and devastating irony. And he fell for such pish-posh! And all because Clare had a trick of sliding down ivory lids over astonishing black eyes and then lifting them suddenly and turning on a caressing smile. Men like Dave Freeland fell for it. And Brian. (221, ellipses in original)

What Irene sees suggests Clare can successfully flirt with men like Dave and Brian because she knows how to play to the very traits of respectable upward mobility Irene trusts to secure safety: Make the men feel as if their accomplishments are talked about, impressive, and exceptional. That such middle-class traits do not provide immunity from Clare (or flirting, or adultery, etc.) frightens Irene. In this context, Irene's concluding focus on what Clare does with her "ivory lids" and "astonishing black eyes" suggests not only what about Clare *Irene* finds seductive, but also that the passing symbolized by Clare's eye "trick" becomes a scapegoat for a much larger and more troubling set of concerns.

These concerns come to the fore shortly after Irene concludes her husband is having an affair with Clare, when she angrily smashes a teacup at a party. Tellingly, Irene is upset not by a scene in which Clare is flirting with Brian, but rather one in which Clare is flirting with Dave Freeland. If even Dave Freeland cannot resist Clare, what hope does Irene have for the freeland promised by idealized domesticity? These fears flood Irene's consciousness: "Brian. What did it mean? How would it affect her and the boys? The boys! She

had a surge of relief. It ebbed, vanished. A feeling of absolute unimportance followed. Actually, she didn't count. She was, to him, only the mother of his sons. That was all. Alone she was nothing. Worse. An obstacle" (221). Here, Irene begins to recognize the position she occupies in idealized domesticity. She depends for safety upon her position among the "talented tenth," which in turn depends on being permanently married to a professional such as Brian. Without this respectable marriage, she would lose not only her position among Harlem's social elite, but also the privileges (and necessities) she can therefore purchase. But in this position, she becomes to Brian only the mother of their sons and thus an "obstacle." Irene may get what she wants if Brian remains because of the children (surely a big assumption): to be "allowed to direct for their own best good the lives of her sons and her husband" (235). But she will do so knowing, at some level, that she and others are miserable — certainly not the fulfillment idealized domesticity promises.

Later, Irene reveals what a ("black") woman must do to maintain this middle-class position: enslave herself and others. To avoid the adjudicating gaze of Hugh Wentworth, the "white" patron of Harlem who comes over to Irene after she drops her teacup, she tells him the following lie:

"Did you notice that cup? Well, you're lucky. It was the ugliest thing that your ancestors, the charming Confederates ever owned. I've forgotten how many thousands of years ago it was that Brian's great-great-grand-uncle owned it. But it has, or had, a good old hoary history. It was brought North by way of the subway.... I've never figured out a way of getting rid of it until about five minutes ago. I had an inspiration. I had only to break it, and I was rid of it for ever. So simple! And I'd never thought of it before." (221-2)

As other critics have noted, this event foreshadows the role Irene plays in Clare's death: she simply gets rid of Clare by dropping her out a window.<sup>13</sup> But moreover, the passage reveals the logic that will play out to that conclusion. Irene not only gives the teacup a history of slavery (like the slaves, it was owned by the Confederates), but also makes it

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<sup>13</sup>See, for example, Brody, "Clare Kendry's 'True' Colors," 1062, and Butler, *Bodies That Matter*, 169-70.

part of the resistance to slavery ("It was brought North by way of the subway," or underground railroad). While Irene associates the teacup with Brian's family, she does not do so unambiguously. Was Brian's uncle one of the Confederates who owned the teacup or one of the slaves who brought it with him along the "subway"? The ambiguity is telling. Irene has represented Brian, by association with his family, as both a Confederate slave master and a slave resisting slavery. Therefore, on the one hand, breaking the teacup because it signifies Brian-as-slave-master suggests Irene is "rag[ing]" (221) against her bondage to a position of dependency in idealized domesticity where "Brian deftly, unnecessarily, pilot[s] her" around the house (184) and submits her to "the lash of his words" when she obstructs his desires (232). On the other hand, breaking the teacup because it signifies Brian-as-fugitive-slave suggests Irene intends to arrest Brian's flight from bondage to idealized domesticity. Finally, Irene breaks this teacup not while watching Clare flirt with Brian, but rather while watching Clare flirt with Dave *Freeland*, suggesting both that Clare's flirting is an attempt to reach a freeland Irene refuses to try for and that Brian's alleged affair is an attempt to reach a freeland different from idealized domesticity.

The teacup incident, then, suggests that idealized domesticity's promises of safety produce subjects who both enslave others and resist their own enslavement. This conflict plays out most clearly in Irene and Brian's argument over whether their son should learn about lynching. Irene attempts to keep her husband from giving the children knowledge about those dangers from which idealized domesticity promises immunity. He responds by telling her she cannot expect him to give up everything he wants to say or do. Irene feels "the lash of these words" (232), suggesting that she feels she is a slave to her husband's desires. But Irene misrecognizes to what she is enslaved. She is enslaved by idealized domesticity to the position of Brian's and the children's obstacle. His words position her as his slave only if one defines freedom as the state of being free from fears of losing one's

control over others. Irene defines freedom in this way, but the text suggests this definition is oppressive. Irene can be free from such fears only by keeping others in bondage. She must "keep" Brian in order "to keep her life fixed, certain" (235), and to do so, she must keep Clare in bondage to Bellew and Margery. "If Clare was freed, anything might happen," "[i]t would only weaken her own power to keep [Brian]" (236).

If, as a way of achieving the protections of the Reconstruction Amendments, post-Reconstruction novelists and readers turned, like Irene, to acquiring bourgeois domesticity and respectable upward mobility, then Irene's method for keeping Clare from being free shows this response's ultimate complicity with the problems it had hoped to counter: the use of murder and terror (lynching) as a way of controlling people and keeping them in their "proper" positions. Critics still debate Irene's role in Clare's death, but as McDowell has convincingly argued, the novel strongly implies that Irene pushes Clare out the window. She writes:

Larsen uses a clever objective correlative: Irene's pattern of lighting cigarettes and snuffing them out. Minutes before Clare falls from the window to her death, "Irene finished her cigarette and threw it out, watching the tiny spark drop slowly down to the white ground below." Clearly attempting a symbolic parallel, Clare is described as "a vital glowing thing, like a flame of red and gold" who falls from (or is thrown out of) the window as well.<sup>14</sup>

By having Irene murder Clare right after thinking "She couldn't have her free" (239), the novel strongly suggests that the domestic fantasy of post-Reconstruction novels parallels, in some important ways, slavery and segregation.<sup>15</sup> At the beginning of the novel, Irene

<sup>14</sup>McDowell, Introduction, xxix.

<sup>15</sup>I would add to McDowell's reading that throughout, the text connects cigarettes and flames to Brian's discontent, Clare's presence, and Irene's own realizations about the lack of safety within idealized domesticity. When Irene is worried about Brian's restlessness, she tells herself, "The thing, this discontent which had exploded into words, would surely die, flicker out, at last" (188). Later, she takes a much less passive role: "But in the meantime, while it was still living and still had the power to flare up and alarm her, it would have to be banked, smothered, and something offered in its stead" (188). When Clare asks Irene why she didn't answer her letter, "Irene [breaks] off and [keeps]

worries about being marked as "black" and "ejected" (150) from the top of the Drayton's rising tower. Yet this is precisely what Irene does to Clare when she pushes her from the top-floor of the Freelands' apartment after Bellew calls her "'a damned dirty nigger'" (238). Just as eugenics supported segregation and purging the "white race" of "non-whites," arguing that such an ordering would solve domestic problems (both in terms of the nation and the home), Irene purges Clare from her life and from the Freelands' "rising tower" in order to attain idealized domesticity's promises.

The end of the novel not only suggests this fantasy of idealized domesticity reinvokes racist violence, coming as it does with Clare's dead body splattered on the "white ground" (238), but also, when Irene's "quaking knees g[i]ve way under her" and she faints, that the promise of safety is left unfulfilled (242). Despite her attempts, Irene does not attain security. Instead, the very pursuit of idealized domesticity's promises puts her in grave danger. Dizzy from the flood of contradictory emotions she feels after pushing Clare out the window, Irene has "to grasp hold of the banister to save herself from pitching downwards" (240), thus demonstrating she is susceptible to Clare's fate even after she has attempted to secure safety. Furthermore, the logic Irene depends upon makes her subject to

Clare waiting while she [lights] a cigarette, [blows] out the match, and drop[s] it into a tray" (194), which she later "press[es] out" (196), all of which foreshadows the ending. When Irene begins to realize the misery in her home, the narrator says, "It was as if in a house long dim, a match had been struck, showing ghastly shapes where had been only blurred shadows" (218).

To argue that this evidence is "circumstantial," as McDowell does (Introduction), is to suggest literary-critical claims need to comply with U.S. jurisprudence, as if the characters we discuss are real people facing real trials. Instead, such literary-critical claims argue about the logic of representations. Butler argues the text never definitively says Irene pushed Clare; instead, the novel leaves open "whether Clare jumped, Irene pushed, or the force of Bellew's words literally bellowed her out the window" (*Bodies That Matter*, 172-3). I think critics too often have celebrated the lack of a definitive statement of Irene's role and thus have ignored the violence to which Irene's reliance on idealized domesticity leads. See also Davis's introduction to the Penguin edition of *Passing*. I agree with DuCille, who argues that if we take Irene to be Clare's murderer, then we can see her as "an active agent in the ordering of her own life and a grotesque, which may be precisely the point" ("Blue Notes on Black Sexuality," 441).

the same kind of violent treatment she has used to expel others. After all, if Clare is an obstacle to the realization of Irene's desires, then Irene, as she herself had recognized briefly, is an obstacle to Brian and their sons. Purifying her home of Clare has not changed Irene's situation. Attempting to secure bourgeois safety by taking up the position of Brian's obstacle and idealized domesticity's slave, Irene ends up putting herself in danger.

#### Identity and Sneaking Around

*Passing* does more than recognize the dangers Irene's dependence on idealized domesticity poses to herself and others. It also portrays the resistances that necessarily serve as the opposites of these normalizing forces.<sup>16</sup> The post-Reconstruction response to social/"racial" injustice relied on making the "talented tenth's" bourgeois behavior visible in the public sphere, particularly to those "whites" who policed it. The talented tenth were to conform to the idealized domesticity and respectable upward mobility of the "white" middle-class and, in return, be recognized as worthy of the rights and protections of the Reconstruction Amendments because of their class identity and regardless of their "race."<sup>17</sup> In other words, the post-Reconstruction response followed in the Enlightenment tradition of promising safety, security, and permanence in exchange for taking up a position within the light of the public sphere. Irene follows this response to the extent of killing the person who poses a threat to it and endangering her own life by obstinately believing in it.

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<sup>16</sup>See Foucault, *The History of Sexuality* 96.

<sup>17</sup>Tate writes, "African-American writers of that era repeatedly used their works explicitly to argue that professional attainment, social esteem, intellectual and cultural refinement — in short, class — were more important than an individual's racial designation. While these writers declared that race was inconsequential, they simultaneously and categorically depicted their cultivated heroes and heroines in shades of skin color ranging from light brown to white" (*Domestic Allegories*, 62).

Foucault criticizes the obstinate belief that in visibility there is a safety worth killing and dying for.<sup>18</sup> As he points out, Jeremy Bentham's panopticon — the technology of power that distributes prisoners around a norm by capturing each cell between backlighting and the gaze emanating from a central tower — emerges out of and participates in the political philosophy of the Enlightenment, particularly the Rousseauist dream of a transparent society. This utopia banishes darkness and makes both the political process and everyone's behavior visible to an "immediate observing gaze that is at once collective and anonymous."<sup>19</sup> The assumption that solutions to social problems require visibility or recognition is central both to Irene's post-Reconstructionist method of struggle and to today's activists' calls for the adjudicating gaze to recognize their rights as members of certain identities. The following questions, therefore, need to concern us: Is the person standing up for his or her rights assuming the position of the prisoner in his or her cell? Does such an act reinvoke the reasons for Bentham's technology of power, the demand to make all sneaking-around visible to the collective gaze, which in turn requires (in the words of Bentham) "the inmate to be constantly under the eyes of an inspector . . . [which] prevents the capacity of any wrong doing, even the wish to commit wrong"?<sup>20</sup> If under panopticism "[e]ach comrade becomes an overseer" and "each overseer must be a comrade," then are not those who could be working together to resist oppressive technologies instead induced to make sure each forgets about "wrong-doing," specifically the

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<sup>18</sup>Foucault worried about how the Enlightenment's systems for producing (subjects of) knowledge and for governing the conduct of subjects and the relations among subjects have led to the imperative to kill, particularly in the form of massacres, holocausts, and atomic annihilation. See Foucault, *The History of Sexuality* 135-39.

<sup>19</sup>Foucault, "The Eye of Power," 232.

<sup>20</sup>Quoted in Foucault, "The Eye of Power," 232.

wrong-doing that could offer resistances to oppressive, dangerous forms of power?<sup>21</sup>

These questions are especially important for *Passing* because the novel reveals how the fantasy of idealized domesticity's safety produces subjects who, like Irene, both enslave others (overseers) and become slaves themselves (comrades).

According to Foucault, the Enlightenment subject looks to the collective, anonymous gaze — just as the prisoner in his cell looks to the central tower — to see both that everything is in its place and that he or she has a position in that public sphere. But just as the prisoner always finds the origin of the central tower's gaze absent, so too does the Enlightenment subject find the origin of the public sphere's gaze absent — collective and anonymous. Unable to possess the absent object (here, the origin of the gaze), the subject identifies him- or herself with a likeness or facsimile of it.<sup>22</sup> In turn, the subject's identification becomes the basis of an identity. "[E]very identity," Diana Fuss writes, "is actually an identification come to light," to consciousness; identification, therefore, is the psychological mechanism that "structurally aids and abets" public identities and thus the panoptic politics of Enlightenment visibility.<sup>23</sup>

But identification also explains why public identities fail. The panoptic politics of visibility and its promises of safety assume the subject can put away and keep away identifications that contradict and thus overturn an identity. But identification theory argues that because the subject "must bear the traces of each and every encounter with the external world" — surely a contradictory lot — the subject need not, cannot remain locked within

<sup>21</sup>Foucault, "The Eye of Power," 231.

<sup>22</sup>See Fuss, *Identification Papers*. Lacan describes the gaze as an absent object, as an *objet a*. See Lacan, *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psycho-Analysis*, 67-119.

<sup>23</sup>Fuss, *Identification Papers*, 2.

such a backlit cell.<sup>24</sup> Another identification will come to light and swamp this identity.

"The astonishing capacity of identifications to reverse and disguise themselves, to multiply and contravene one another, to disappear and reappear years later renders identity profoundly unstable and perpetually open to radical change."<sup>25</sup> Identification, therefore, is the site not only where panopticism works, but also where it fails, where one finds resistances to panopticism and to the Enlightenment political philosophy it emerged alongside of.

One can see the messiness of identification at work in Irene's attempts to see and be seen as a member of Harlem's "talented tenth." Irene occupies the position of the comrade-overseer. Paralleling her position in the home, she occupies in the community the position of one whose identity it is to lift others as she climbs. Not only must she take up her position in her cell, adjusting to the normalizing forces of the talented tenth's proper-conduct texts, but she must also uplift other "blacks"—putting them in their proper places according to class and displaying them to the adjudicating gaze (of middle-class "whites"). Irene enacts her identity-role by selling the Negro Welfare League's dance tickets, which mark a class distinction between those who buy boxes and those who have only paid a dollar at the door. Both groups are subject to the investigations, gossip, and policing of conduct that show people their cells. Irene, however, acts as if box tickets buy one protection from the kind of inspection, gossip, and worse she had feared on the hot Chicago streets, even though she knows they do not.<sup>26</sup> Irene tells Clare, for example, that

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<sup>24</sup>Fuss, *Identification Papers*, 3.

<sup>25</sup>Fuss, *Identification Papers*, 3.

<sup>26</sup>In the "Box Seat" chapter of *Cane*, Toomer draws a parallel between the houses of the "black" middle-class and the box seats at the theater. In both, people click metallically into their chairs and feel themselves under the policing gaze that shows them

without a box, a woman "might be mistaken" for a "[lady] of easy virtue looking for trade" and that she is afraid she herself will get mixed up in Clare's unpleasant and dangerous situation (199).

Sitting in the boxes, both Hugh Wentworth and Irene are subject to overseeing observations that show them their places. Not only can people on the dance floor observe, inquire, and gossip about them, but Hugh and Irene evaluate each other's conduct. Therefore, when Hugh tries to "find out . . . the name, status, and race of the blonde beauty [Clare]" on the dance floor, Irene must answer him carefully (204-5). Irene's position depends upon being able to name who is "black," to show this person his or her proper place, and to display the proper match to the adjudicating gaze of the public sphere, particularly to the "whites," such as Hugh, who police it. But Irene cannot easily name and display Clare because Clare passes for both "white" and "black" and because members of both "races" are attending the dance. If Irene were to name Clare differently than Clare were to name herself to people at the dance, the mix-up could precipitate the kind of scene Irene most dreads—one that would make her the subject of the unflattering inspection, gossip, and worse, which members of the "black" middle-class, as models and arrangers of decorum, are supposed to be above.

To protect her position, Irene sneaks around Hugh's question in such a way that she also critiques the effects of such positionings. She never does answer Hugh's question, and in the process of avoiding it, she not only criticizes his desire to know, but

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their proper positions. Just as I have drawn a connection between the boxes at the dance and the cells of prisoners in the panopticon, Dan refers to the houses as zoo cages and tries to get Muriel to rebel against the "zoo-restrictions and keeper-taboos" of the "black" middle-class (Toomer, *Case*, 62).

also suggests subjugated knowledges exist in response to such inquisitions.<sup>27</sup> She tells him:

"It's easy for a Negro to 'pass' for white. But I don't think it would be so simple for a white person to 'pass' for coloured."

"Never thought of that" [he replies].

"No, you wouldn't. Why should you?"

He regarded her critically through mists of smoke. "Slippin' me, Irene?"

She said soberly: "Not you, Hugh. I'm too fond of you. And you're too sincere." (207)

If in selling tickets to the N.W.L. dance Irene is the comrade who has become an overseer, here she is the overseer who has become a comrade. She articulates the differences between "whites" and "blacks," the need for "blacks" to know about the codes used by "whites" while "whites" do not need to know about the codes used by "blacks." When Irene reminds Hugh of why he does not need to know the answer to his question, he quickly reminds her to return to her "place." To maintain her position, she must now give Hugh a response that appeases him in his role as the "white" missionary in Harlem. But at the same time, by telling Hugh he is "too sincere," she sneaks by him an even more pointed, personal criticism. His response to Irene's answer was sincere, and this sincerity proves Irene's point. By so closely observing her and asking her if she is "slippin'" him, if she is disrespecting him in his position as overseer of "black" middle-class overseers, Hugh shows that while he need not know anything about the "black" middle class, the latter have forced upon them knowledge of what the "white" middle-class expects and what they will not tolerate—in particular that they will not tolerate any sneaking around ("Slippin'") the "white" overseers' gaze. In sneaking around Hugh, Irene protects the overall panoptic structure by protecting both her own position as one of the "talented tenth"

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<sup>27</sup>Here, the subjugated knowledge of passing and spotting passers. Robinson, argues that "what may be available to the in-group is the visibility of the apparatus of passing—literally the machinery that enables the performance. What the in-group sees is not a stable prepassing identity but rather the apparatus of passing that manufactures presumption (of heterosexuality, of whiteness) as the means to a successful performance" ("It Takes One to Know One," 721-2).

and Hugh's position as "white missionary" or overseer to Irene in her position as overseer, but she also manages to showcase the effects of such positionings—the need to develop knowledges and practices of sneaking around.<sup>28</sup>

In the process of struggling to secure her cell in panoptic visibility, therefore, Irene articulates subjugated knowledges about the effects of such positionings and engages in subjugated practices—sneaking around and signifying on Hugh's evaluation of her response to his question. But Irene's is a brief moment of resistance. Clare offers a more sustained example of how sneaking around can lead to a relation to visibility, "safety," and desire that is different than panoptic identity politics. If, like Irene, Clare sneaks around, she does not do so to maintain *a* cell.<sup>29</sup> The panoptic politics of visibility requires one to act as if one can claim an unproblematic relation to a homogeneous, permanent identity by

<sup>28</sup>I would disagree with Van Leer's portrayal of Hugh Wentworth as "refus[ing] to play Irene's game of determining Clare's true color" (*The Queening of America*, 185). Rather, I would argue Hugh's question about Clare's "color" forces Irene both to join in and to refuse to play Hugh's game.

Van Leer also argues that Hugh Wentworth, "[a]s uncloseted, married, white, and gay, . . . overturns many of the assumptions underwriting Irene's concept of passing" (185). Van Leer argues that Irene has "[i]nternalized . . . as a psychic conflict between personal needs and racial identification" a "concept of passing [that] functions as an effective means of social control" (184). However, according to Van Leer, Hugh "proves that invisible identities do not mark psychic disorder or social dishonesty" (185). While I think Van Leer's reading raises intriguing questions about the role of Irene's reaction to passing, I find his portrayal of Hugh not only frustratingly unsupported by readings of passages from the novel—relying only on the statement that Hugh Wentworth is modelled on Carl Van Vechten, a "white gay novelist" (185)—but also contrary to his critical goals. Given that Van Leer champions Hugh as refusing to "play Irene's game of determining Clare's true color," one would expect him to contest a form of critical inquiry that engages in the practice, in a way reminiscent of Bellw and Irene, of marking people (like Hugh and Van Vechten) with an identity they themselves have not assumed, "outing" their "invisible identities" into panoptic visibility where conduct can be managed, governed, normalized.

<sup>29</sup>I agree with Cutter's argument in "Sliding Significations" that while Helga Crane, the protagonist of Larsen's *Quicksand*, passes for one thing after another, each time attempting to find a social identity that will mesh perfectly with her essential self, Clare uses passing to multiply her roles and to avoid the foreclosure of identity significations. Clare, therefore, avoids Helga's fate of becoming "trapped in one stifling and constricting role" (75).

repressing knowledge of the ability of identifications — especially rejected identifications — to unexpectedly threaten or overturn a consciously claimed identity. Clare's process of taking up, leaving, and returning to various positions or cells represents a way to live with the impermanence of identity, as well as a way to use the effects of segregation. Referring to the time in Chicago when she and Irene "passed" in front of Bellew, Clare says, "*It was that, partly, that has made me want to see other people. It just swooped down and changed everything.* If it hadn't been for that, I'd have gone on to the end, never seeing any of you. But that did something to me, and I've been so lonely since!" (196, emphasis mine). Refusing to renounce pleasurable identifications that unexpectedly threaten the security of her identity, Clare instead recognizes contradictory identifications and pursues new identity positions that give her pleasure, even in the face of dangers.

Irene, however, rejects Clare's way of life, especially Clare's "having way" (153) and the dangers she encounters in pursuit of her desires. When Clare tells Irene she wants to keep visiting Harlem, Irene is shocked at the "silly risks" her friend is willing to take. At first, Irene tells her coming to Harlem is "not just the right thing" to do. After Clare laughs at her wording, Irene says she meant it is "dangerous" (195). Irene's revision reveals that calling some things dangerous (instead of admitting that everything is dangerous) serves as a cover for the meticulous normalizing forces showing one what is "just the right thing" to do. In effect, the appeal to the fantasy of safety and warnings of danger serve to repress the pursuit of pleasures and desires that contradict one's cell. Here, the fantasy of safety works to repress Irene's desire for Clare's experiences and even the thought of what Bentham called "wrong-doing":

[I]nto her mind had come a thought, strange and irrelevant, a suspicion, that had surprised and shocked her and driven her to her feet. It was that is spite of her determined selfishness the woman before her was yet capable of heights and depths of feeling that she, Irene Redfield, had never known. Indeed, never cared to know. The thought, the suspicion, was gone as quickly as it had come. (195)

In this frightening moment of identification with Clare's way of life, Irene briefly sees Clare's passing as being about experiencing "heights and depths of feeling," the pleasurable mix of identifications that undermines "self" interests and a permanent, homogeneous identity. Irene's consciously assumed identity is shocked by this unexpected identification. Her identity may depend on a rejection of Clare's risky passing and "having way," but Irene's refused identification can be more accurately termed a disavowed identification—one already made and denied in the unconscious. This scene shows that, like all identities, Irene's fails because disidentifications return to surprise it.

As in the exchange with Hugh Wentworth, Irene's attempt to re-secure her cell in the face of Clare's challenges leads her to make an observation that threatens the panoptic politics of visibility. The suggestion of derision in Clare's voice when she says Irene is "safe," along with worries over Brian's restlessness, leads Irene to another brief moment of realization, the most important one in the book: "'I'm beginning to believe,' she murmur[s], 'that no one is ever completely happy, or free, or safe'" (196). Clare pulls Irene along by asking, "'Well, then, what does it matter? One risk more or less, if we're not safe anyway, if even you're not, it can't make all the difference in the world'" (196). But Irene pushes away Clare's implication, refusing to go there. As she does so often, Irene appeals to a cost-benefit analysis of "self" interests. She tells Clare, "'you'll just have to endure some things and give up others. As we've said before, everything must be paid for'" (200). Consciously, at least, Irene has made the decision to be miserable and a prisoner/slave in order to continue acting as if her cell provides safety, even though she knows otherwise.

The text repeatedly suggests, however, that Irene has unconsciously made another choice and that her disidentification with Clare's "having ways" and obstinate pursuits is actually an identification she has already made and will keep making regardless of conscious intentions. "Clare, it seemed, still retained her ability to secure the thing that she

wanted in the face of any opposition, and in utter disregard of the convenience and desire of others. Most critics have focused on the differences between Irene and Clare, how they are two halves of one whole.<sup>30</sup> But Irene and Clare are, in some important ways, more alike than different. One could say about Irene what she says about Clare: Irene too is willing to do anything to attain what she wants — the promises of idealized domesticity. She would endanger Clare by "exposing" her to Bellew, send her son and husband to Europe, kill Clare before she lets her be free, make herself a slave to her cell, and even endanger her own life by remaining Brian's obstacle. In these respects, there is not much difference between Irene and Clare: both will encounter danger and expose others to danger in pursuit of their desires.<sup>31</sup>

They do, however, differ in how they incorporate this risk-taking into their lives. Irene denies she engages in risks and sees herself as willing to sacrifice desires in exchange for safety. Clare, however, tells Irene, "'Why, to get the things I want badly enough, I'd do anything, hurt anybody, throw anything away. Really, 'Rene, I'm not safe'" (210). Clare has incorporated desire — and the dangerous things people do in the pursuit of desire — into her life. Irene tries to repress desire, denies she has any understanding of Clare's dangerous pursuits, and continually tries to lock herself in the cell that promises safety and security in exchange for a permanent occupation of a homogeneous identity and of a recognized place within panoptic visibility. Irene's sneaking around, because she uses

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<sup>30</sup>See Brody "Clare Kendry's 'True' Colors," 1053; Cutter, "Sliding Significations," 80; Berlant, "National Brands / National Body," 111; DuCille, "Blues Notes on Black Sexuality," 439; Ammons, *Conflicting Stories*, 190-91.

<sup>31</sup>Wall, however, argues that "Irene's world is barely more secure than that of her friend, and when it is threatened, she is every bit as dangerous" ("Passing for What?" 107). While Wall and I agree that the middle-class is not a place of security, my argument strongly differs from her implication that security is to be found in "a wholly integrated identity" (98). I argue that the danger Irene faces and the dangers she poses to others is the result of her attempt to secure a "wholly integrated identity" in order to achieve the promises of idealized domesticity.

it only in attempts to secure her one cell, only makes her situation worse. Clare's sneaking around, because it leads her to take up and leave a number of positions, decreases her dependence on any one cell and creates opportunities, but not guarantees, to avoid the dangers of one cell by appealing to or moving onto another. In the process, Clare devotes herself to producing different kinds of subject positions, ones that do not depend upon taking up cells in the light of the public sphere.

#### Games of Friendship

As the above discussion of Irene suggests, Enlightenment ideology (the panoptic politics of visibility) often continues to hold us even when we know its promises of safety are false. What then can be done to make and save the subjects who can create new cultures of dissidence, when so many people only want to stay home and act as if their cells provide safety and security? The complex series of encounters between Irene and Clare provide a way of thinking about friendship as a game of push and pull in which Clare tries both to problematize Irene's reliance on panoptic visibility and to cultivate her sneaking around. This model of friendship offers a way of challenging people to respond to what is dangerous now without either forcing them to take up and stay in positions in which they might not want to remain or prescribing programmatic forms which discourage the inventiveness needed to keep responding to new dangers.

Given the problems with panoptic politics, a post-Enlightenment ethics requires a different relation to visibility, a different way of seeing and being visible to others. Clare's way of acting around Irene offers such an alternative. I have already discussed how Irene sneaks around Hugh in order to re-secure both her cell and his. Irene also attempts to sneak around Clare, trying to avoid the messy encounters in which her old friend's "having way" would involve her, without violating the social graces of bourgeois decorum. In response to Irene's maneuvers, Clare usually does something — gives a grin, asks a teasing

question— that lets Irene know Clare knows what is going on and makes Irene feel as if she is being mocked.<sup>32</sup> For example, when Clare wants to hear what the old group said about her once she left, Irene blushes and avoids the question by saying she can not remember such trifles (156). Clare, however, can read this blushing evasion and, instead of letting Irene politely evade the question, says, “[O]f course you remember! But I won’t make you tell me” (154). Unlike Hugh’s response, which also reveals Irene’s sneaking around, Clare’s does not remind Irene to get back into her “proper” place. Rather, Clare’s questions and quizzical looks cause Irene to feel “as if [Clare] had been in the secret of the other’s thoughts and was mocking her” (156). By making Irene feel mocked, Clare in effect gives her a push that shows her how middle-class positioning itself requires the sneaking around it disavows. Clare’s countermaneuvers, therefore, try to remind Irene of disavowed identifications with Clare’s relation to panoptic visibility.

One of Clare’s most explicitly mocking questions takes place during a tea party she gives for Irene and Gertrude, another childhood friend. When Gertrude tells Irene and Clare a “black” man they used to know is now a “Jew,” Clare says, “It certainly sounds funny enough. Still, it’s his own business. If he gets along better by turning—” (169). Upset by Clare’s response, Irene backlights her old friend’s “having way” and, much like Hugh’s response to her own disrespectful question, not so subtly suggests Clare should reform herself: “It evidently doesn’t occur to either you or Gertrude,” Irene says, “that

<sup>32</sup>Johnson sees these looks, these long stares, as being the “identifying signs of a lesbian structure” (“Lesbian Spectacles,” 162), an interpretive move which employs a type of critical inquiry and identity politics (under the cover of reader-response) I have been criticizing in this essay. In *Bodies That Matter*, Butler discusses these looks in terms of the word “queer,” which appears frequently throughout the novel. Arguing that “queering is what upsets and exposes passing,” Butler focuses on how Irene at first takes Clare’s stare at the Drayton to be “a threat of exposure,” but later finds herself thoroughly seduced (177). My discussion of the push-and-pull relationship between Clare and Irene attempts to build upon this aspect of Butler’s discussion by showing how Clare’s queering upsets and exposes Irene’s passing in order to seduce her to join in a game that both gives pleasure and may give some specificity to the “unlived political promise of a solidarity yet to come” Butler speculates about in her essay (179).

he might possibly be sincere in changing his religion. Surely everyone doesn't do everything for gain'" (169). In the process of reprimanding Clare, Irene assumes the position of overseer, the competent and knowledgeable reformer who will show the ignorant and wayward the form they should take up when responding to such situations. Clare immediately feels this backlitting, but maneuvers out of the cell of reform by mocking the identity of the reformer:

Clare Kendry had no need to search for the full meaning of that utterance. She reddened slightly and retorted seriously: "Yes, I admit that might be possible — his being sincere, I mean. It just didn't happen to occur to me, that's all. I'm surprised," and the seriousness changed to mockery, "that you should have expected it to. Or did you really?" (169)

Irene replies, "'You don't, I'm sure, imagine that that is a question that I can answer. . . . Not here and now'" (169). Clare knows that Irene is unlikely to expect her friend to take a "crossing-over" sincerely and, therefore, that Irene's statement is not suggesting an alternative explanation for the man's behavior so much as it is trying to get Clare to be loyal to the "race." Clare, in turn, accepts that the man might be sincere, but rejects Irene's suggestion to reform herself. To get out of the backlit position into which Irene has put her, Clare mocks Irene-as-reformer/overseer. Clare's reply both gets Irene to drop the attempt at reform and gives her a push back by critiquing her position by showing Irene how willingly she herself puts aside "race" loyalty for personal gain: Irene, to protect her position in bourgeois respectability, had dropped the attempt at reform. In other words, Clare again shows Irene they both sneak around for gain.

Whereas Irene attempts to avoid danger by forcing herself and others into prescribed "pure" forms (or cells) and by killing those who will not fit, Clare sets up a much more open game in which one friend's move prompts the other to respond in a way that does not violate the unspoken rules of the game, which take into account the dangers of the situation. Clare sets up such a game when she gets Irene to pass in front of Bellew. Clare seems to have purposely created this dangerous situation by having her friends come

when Bellew would be home and by not informing them he is ignorant of her "past." Instead, she waits until they are in the process of passing to let them know. She cleverly does so as she makes her first move, asking Bellew to tell her friends why he calls her "Nig." He explains: "'When we were first married, she was as white as— as— well as white as a lily. But I declare she's gettin' darker and darker. I tell her if she don't look out, she'll wake up one of these days and find she's turned into a nigger'" (171). The three women join Bellew in laughing at the remark, seemingly enjoying the pleasure of the risky trick they are playing on the "white" racist. But Irene overdoes it, "[u]ntil, catching sight of Clare's face, the need for a more quiet enjoyment of this priceless joke, and for caution, struck her" (171). After subtly making Irene aware of such unspoken ground rules, Clare continues the game, asking Bellew to explain why it would matter to him if, after all these years, he found out she was "'one or two per cent coloured'" (171). By describing the quizzical looks Clare gives to Irene as Bellew answers this question, the text suggests Clare is arranging this dangerous encounter for their mutual pleasure and that she is pushing Irene to try responding again:

Irene's lips trembled almost uncontrollably, but she made a desperate effort to fight back her disastrous desire to laugh again, and succeeded. . . . [S]he turned an oblique look on Clare and encountered her peculiar eyes fixed on her with an expression so dark and deep and unfathomable that she had for a short moment the sensation of gazing into the eyes of some creature utterly strange and apart. A faint sense of danger brushed her, like the breath of a cold fog. (172)

While Irene describes Clare in a way that suggests she disidentifies with her friend and her risk-taking ("Absurd, her reason told her" [172]), she nevertheless joins Clare in making the situation more dangerous and more tense by asking Bellew if he really dislikes Negroes. Irene feels ashamed by his reply, and towards the end of the visit thinks, "[h]er understanding [of Clare] was rapidly increasing, as was her pity and her contempt" (174). Yet Irene immediately goes on to think, "Clare was so daring, so lovely, and so 'having'" — hardly terms of contempt (174). The "faint sense of danger" that brushes Irene

"like the breath of a cold fog" registers the moment when Irene's consciously assumed identity is being haunted by disavowed identifications. Clare's game, then, brings out and sets into play the disavowed identification Irene has to both her and her dangerous pursuits.

Clare continues this challenging pull by attempting to cultivate the disavowed identification she had put into play in the game with Bellew. When Clare visits Irene in New York, she continues to cultivate Irene's passing or sneaking around by telling her she "'behaved beautifully that day'" (196). When, as discussed above, Irene comes to a brief moment of realization when she says, "'I'm beginning to believe . . . that no one is ever completely happy, or free, or safe'" (196), Clare pulls Irene along, asking, "'Well, then, what does it matter? One risk more or less, if we're not safe anyway, if even you're not, it can't make all the difference in the world'" (196). Clare desires to see Irene and her friends again, therefore, not simply because her meeting with Irene and Gertrude brought up old identifications with "black" people, but also because the way Irene responded to the dangerous game gave Clare a pleasure of which she now desires more. After apologizing to Irene for the encounter with Bellew and after praising how beautifully she handled the situation, Clare admits, "'It was that, partly, that has made me want to see other people'" (196). Clare, therefore, has been changed by the game she played with Irene as well. Cultivating Irene's risky sneaking-around becomes part of Clare's pursuit of pleasure. A relationship with Irene may help Clare to gain a pleasurable position in Harlem, but it is certainly not the easiest way "'to see Negroes, to be with them again, to talk with them, to hear them laugh'" (200). This way prolongs Clare's desire, allowing her more pleasure; she not only must sneak around Bellew, but also must engage in games of push and pull with Irene.

In the push-and-pull encounters between Clare and Irene, Larsen's novel provides a model of friendship that can usefully respond to dangerous appeals to the "safety" of

idealized domesticity and "secure" identities.<sup>33</sup> This model suggests friends (etc.) can push and pull each other out of fantasies of domestic safety and into experimental responses to what is dangerous now by drawing upon each other's multiple and contradictory identifications. For example, this model offers a useful response to today's dominant responses to HIV/AIDS. Just as post-Reconstruction activists and novelists responded to the dangers of segregation by appealing to segregated spaces, such as the ideal home and class-stratified dances, and to disciplined identities, such as the talented tenth, today's public health educators and politicians continually tell us that being true to idealized domesticity and to our identities will keep us safe from HIV. For example, talking heads remind us we should not condone President Clinton's affair with Monica Lewinsky, regardless of our political position— even though the sex acts they allegedly engaged in would be less likely to transmit HIV than the latex-free intercourse heterosexual spouses are supposed to enjoy. As Cindy Patton argues, dominant American culture "prefers to police its narrow boundaries rather than allow[ ] young people to imagine any other sex than the single form [intercourse] that, from the standpoint of HIV transmission, is most dangerous."<sup>34</sup> Instead, she argues, "the nation strain[s] to create a path from the innocence of one family to the safety of another," imagining youths can remain safe so long as they can be prevented from "experimenting" with the practices and knowledges to which "bad

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<sup>33</sup>This model would probably prove most useful to those who live in (or have access to) an urban environment, which is the setting for *Passing*. While I agree with those critics, such as Brody ("Clare Kendry's 'True' Colors," 1061), who point to connections between Larsen's novel and Morrison's *Sula*, I would also want to point out that *Passing* takes place in cities (Chicago and New York), while *Sula* takes place in a rural area. *Sula*, perhaps, offers a site for thinking about the possibilities to and limits of the resistances offered by *Passing*.

<sup>34</sup>Patton, *Fatal Advice*, 82.

"influences" would expose them.<sup>35</sup> Segregated social spaces and disciplined identities have returned as the solutions to domestic problems.

Yet resistances exist. A recent article in *Time* magazine suggests the "experimenting" condemned by the dominant responses to HIV are in fact saving teens' lives. *Time* laments teens' sexual precocity and "the desecration of love and the subversion of mature relationships," yet it admits a growing number of U.S. teens know how to protect themselves against HIV, STDs, and unwanted pregnancies and are making condom use during intercourse nonnegotiable.<sup>36</sup> *Time* makes it clear that this is because teens are picking up knowledge about sex from "bad influences," such as TV, cable, video, music, the Internet, and their peers, and are acting upon this knowledge both by talking about sex in a "shockingly" explicit manner and by having sex earlier than ever before. *Time* brushes aside this good news. Instead, it recommends that we return to segregating teens from "bad influences" by creating idealized homes that will preach the dangers of experimenting and the values of love and mature relationships. The invocation of idealized domesticity and stable identities that Patton criticizes and that *Time* yearns for is a dangerous response to HIV. Rather than support teens in their quest to find pleasurable practices to enjoy while avoiding HIV transmission, this response strives to return both teens and their parents to their "proper" places in order to create a supposedly safe domestic space. As *Passing* shows in its counter to post-Reconstruction responses to segregation and racism, such a fantasy of idealized domesticity and stable identities fails to provide the safety it promises and in fact produces dead bodies in its demand for purity. Dominant society becomes a killer like Irene when it insists on what is normal and domestic.

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<sup>35</sup>Patton, *Fatal Advice*, 34.

<sup>36</sup>Stodghill, "Where'd You Learn That?" 54.

The game of friendship suggested by *Passing*, however, offers an alternative, a model that suggests friends (etc.) can push and pull each other out of fantasies of domestic safety and into experimental sex acts by drawing upon each other's multiple and contradictory identifications. This model of social interaction encourages teens and others to cultivate alliances with those "bad influences," like Clare, who have had to become experts in inventing responses to what is dangerous now and, therefore, in the case of HIV, can show interested others already-transmission-disrupting pleasures (and create new ones with them), as well as ways to sneak around social policing. The media *Time* points to as the sites where precocious teens are acquiring their knowledge would certainly have important roles to play in forming such connections with that which and those whom idealized domesticity tells its members to disidentify. Magazines, academic research, and classrooms could function as such sites as well, so long as they avoid presenting programs, which imply a prohibition against the inventiveness needed to respond to new dangers. Such relationships, carried out both among people and between readers and texts, offer a way to produce and perhaps save those subjects who will create new cultures of dissidence, cultures that are always working on themselves by inventing responses to what is dangerous now without falling into the dangerously uninventive campaigns of panoptic reforms.

CHAPTER 5  
ANECDOCALEVIDENCE:  
MOTIVATING SOCIAL CHANGE IN REAGAN'S AMERICA AND  
FANNIE FLAGG'S *FRIED GREEN TOMATOES AT THE WHISTLE STOP CAFE*

People were so in love with that movie [*Fried Green Tomatoes*]. It's as if they're searching for something they've lost, like strong friendships and family tradition.

—Jerrie Williams, explaining the immediate success of the Whistle Stop Cafe, which opened on the site where the movie was filmed<sup>1</sup>

This individualism has made us very alone. Not everyone can be like Madonna, with the energy to create a new self every day. People are regrouping themselves together, even if it's just to dance the tango or cook together. There could be a political follow-up to this. Groups are wanting to take things into their hands—and politicians are not aware of this, or are pretending not to be aware.

—Li Edelkoort<sup>2</sup>

The Politics of Nostalgia

Gary Wills attributes Reagan's popularity to his ability to address, in the anecdotes he told to the voting public, people's fears of change. As Wills argues, "Change is disturbing even to its celebrants; it provokes, of itself, a countereffort to hang onto something—to one's self, at the least; to identity."<sup>3</sup> "The Great Communicator" responded to these disturbances by exchanging with voters a past we never had—"a mythical

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<sup>1</sup>Quoted in Goodman and Wescott, "Fried Green Tomatoes, Hon?" 56. Church also invokes this quote, but reads it and the community Evelyn finds positively, whereas I go on to read it and Evelyn's solutions critically and in terms of Reaganism. See Church, "The Balancing Act of *Fried Green Tomatoes*, 208.

<sup>2</sup>Quoted in Lury, *Consumer Culture*, 254. Li Edelkoort is Europe's leading trends forecaster.

<sup>3</sup>Wills, *Reagan's America*, 386.

frontier life, an America where merit and hard work were the only paths to success, where the government did not interfere with the workings of the market's invisible hand.<sup>4</sup> In these exchanges of anecdotes, Reagan got voters to believe not only this version of America's past, but also that this past would be their future if they joined his movement to reform "big government."<sup>5</sup> Reagan's anecdotes, filled with both small-town communalism and optimistic frontier individualism, exchanged with voters the myths about America's past that made people feel as if they were going "back to the future," to an America where capitalism and technology had not altered old morals and patterns, but instead had helped people attain them more easily. Such anecdotes about the past, repeated often enough, made many voters feel as if their disrupted identities could be restabilized by returning to what we "have always been."<sup>6</sup>

Fannie Flagg's *Fried Green Tomatoes at the Whistle Stop Cafe* (1987) challenges Reagan's anecdotes of charismatic individualism and small-town communalism. At first glance, the novel seems to reiterate Reagan's strategy. It tells how a depressed and lost homemaker, Evelyn, rediscovers success and her position in society by engaging with her elderly friend, Ninny, in a Reaganite exchange of anecdotes about charismatic individual-

<sup>4</sup>Wills, *Reagan's America*, 375.

<sup>5</sup>My sense of the uses of nostalgia in both the movie and book versions of *Fried Green Tomatoes* differs from Church. She argues that both offer "a story that has nothing to do with their own lives and identities and in a cafe far from their own homes" (Church, "The Balancing Act of *Fried Green Tomatoes*, 208). While I agree the story is one "far from their own homes," I argue that this story has everything to do with "their own lives and identities" in that it offers a past that they can supposedly get back to in the future if they join Reagan's campaign to reform Big Government. In particular, as I will argue below, Evelyn updates Ninnie's nostalgia for the 1980s by routing it through the 1950s and the narrator of the omnisciently narrated stories about Whistle Stop presents a different way of updating the Depression Era by routing it through the 1960s.

<sup>6</sup>Nadel, *Flatlining on the Field of Dreams*, and Cannon, *President Reagan*, also discuss Reagan's use of anecdotes about small towns.

ism and small-town communalism. Ninny's anecdotes present to Evelyn the combination of the charismatic individual and the small town as a solution both to social problems, such as homelessness, racism, and wife-abuse, and to an individual's feelings of depression and alienation. In effect, the parts of the novel that focus on Evelyn and Ninny attempt to counter Reaganism's disenfranchisement of certain social groups and its "yuppie" elitism, but do so in a way that reiterates Reaganite ideology—its strategy of individualized populism and its advocacy of the individual over society, charity over social-structural change, and self-determination over collective response.<sup>7</sup>

The movie version of this novel achieved great popularity by increasing this Reaganite strategy.<sup>8</sup> In the movie, both Ninny and Evelyn have been disturbed by the social and cultural changes of the past three decades. When she meets Evelyn in the nursing home, Ninny tells her stories about Idgie's successful small-business, The Whistle Stop Cafe, and how it supported small-town communalism during the Great Depression. In response, Evelyn loses weight and becomes a successful sales representative for Mary Kay Cosmetics. Evelyn comes to participate in small-town communalism because of her business success and invites Ninny to live with her and her husband. That Ninny turns out to be an aged Idgie in the movie suggests Evelyn has directly inherited Idgie's role of being

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<sup>7</sup>On Reagan's individualized populism, see Feuer, *Seeing Through the Eighties*.

<sup>8</sup>*Fried Green Tomatoes*, dir. Jon Avnet, 1991. The low-budget film and video grossed over \$42 million in the year following its release. The video occupied the number one position in rentals in February 1993, pushing ahead of such family films as *Beauty and the Beast*, *101 Dalmatians*, and *The Muppet Movie*. See Church, "The Balancing Act of *Fried Green Tomatoes*," 193.

a strong businesswomen whose success enables a small-town's traditional values in the face of socioeconomic change.<sup>9</sup>

Whereas the movie collapses the characters of Ninny and Idgie into one, the novel keeps them separate. By keeping them separate, the novel avoids portraying Reaganite ideology as triumphant; instead Reaganism is only a temporary victory in a long battle against oppressive power relations. The novel accomplishes this portrayal by focusing on the politics of exchanging anecdotes. Evelyn learns of Idgie's rebellious social actions from Ninny's nostalgic stories of the charismatic individual and the small town. The novel, however, presents the reader with other accounts of Idgie and Whistle Stop: the chapters of omniscient narration and the stories circulated by the local historian Dot Weems and by the anonymous authors of Southern newspapers. These accounts offer parts of the stories of which Ninny is unaware or is leaving out and therefore provide sites for the reader to look for resistances to Ninny's and Evelyn's Reaganite abuse of the past.

In particular, Ninny never tells Evelyn about the moments when Idgie engaged in "passing" as a "black man," the Robin-Hood-like bandit, Railroad Bill. In fact, the various

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<sup>9</sup>In the film's final scenes, Ninny provocatively remarks to Evelyn that they might see Idgie that day and Evelyn finds a fresh note from Idgie on Ruth's grave before finding Ninny standing nearby. In the book, Evelyn visits the cemetery and finds the note after Ninny has already died. Therefore, I disagree with Church's contention that the movie is based closely on the novel. See Church, "The Balancing Act of *Fried Green Tomatoes*, 194. Not only is there the above-mentioned difference in the ending, but the novel includes multiple and significantly different narrations of Whistle Stop while the movie presents no conflict between the stories Nannie tells and the flashbacks involving Idgie and others. Reid sees the movie as utopian for both lesbians and blacks. See Reid, "Rebirth of a Nation." Reid fails to take into account the very limited roles played by black characters in the movie. Their lines are few, characters such as the older Artis and Clarissa are cut out, and Idgie and Smokey Lonesome now help Sipsy decide what to do with Bennett's corpse. As Church writes, "the film presents black characters only in relation to the whites and makes little attempt to show their points of view — the racism they face, the thrill they may feel in visiting a sophisticated black city, the temptation some have to pass for white, the sacrifices some make for future generations who see them only as Uncle Toms," all of which the novel does present (Church, "The Balancing Act of *Fried Green Tomatoes*," 203). Interestingly, Holmlund notes that no reviews or articles are indexed for the film version in journals or newspapers with largely African-American readerships. See Holmlund, "Cruisin' for a Bruisin'," n.15.

accounts of Idgie do not allow one to identify a "real," stable, non—"passing" Idgie. For example, when Dot Weems reports on the skit that The Dill Pickle Club performs at a high-school benefit, she says that at this "womanless wedding," Idgie played the groom.<sup>10</sup> One might assume this skit's comedy resides in everyday men dressing as brides and bridesmaids while the everyday woman, Idgie, dresses as the groom. Yet by calling this a "womanless wedding," the text of the anecdote does not allow us to remain comfortable with the assumption that Idgie is "really" a woman. Instead, it refuses to recognize Idgie as anything other than as the role she is playing currently.

With its variety of storytellers, *Fried Green Tomatoes* shows how the exchange of anecdotes can be used both to support (in the case of Ninny and Evelyn) and to resist (in the case of Idgie) the dominant culture's structures of subordination. While Ninny tells Evelyn anecdotes that look back nostalgically to fix disrupted identity positions in racist hierarchies, Idgie tells anecdotes that offer to disrupt fixed identity positions. By telling anecdotes about other people "passing" and by revealing her own "secret identities," Idgie exchanges with oppressed others, who also have to keep secrets and be inconsistent, new narrative possibilities, ones that lead to collective acts of resistance not based on stable or "real" identities. Moreover, Idgie and her cohorts create a site for motivating social change through the exchange of anecdotes. By using the cafe as a site for the Dill Pickle Club to meet, they create a space that gestures towards a counterculture. Bringing together subjects from a plurality of social fields to exchange anecdotes, the club creates opportunities to destabilize identities fixed in inequality by presenting each other with alternate narratives and narrative positions. These gestures toward a collective resistance to oppression, however, are transmitted by Ninny to Evelyn, who uses them to articulate a politics of individual happiness, of individuals "making it through," and of a resegregated South—in

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<sup>10</sup> Flagg, *Fried Green Tomatoes at the Whistle Stop Cafe*, 278. In the future, references to this text will be cited parenthetically by page number alone.

other words, a reiteration of the Reaganite myth of good times. By reserving the final scene for Idgie and a friend to exchange an anecdote with some vacationing travelers, however, the novel leaves open the possibility that future generations will make better use of the possibilities offered by the other anecdotes of Idgie and Whistle Stop.

#### Nostalgic Anecdotes in the Eighties

Like Reagan, Ninny in *Fried Green Tomatoes* tells anecdotes that attempt to fix identities disrupted by change. While Evelyn is lost and depressed, Ninny seems to be at one with herself. Ninny, therefore, seems to be in a position to give Evelyn advice, and Evelyn attempts several life-changes in response to the older woman's anecdotes. But Ninny is not "at one with herself." She is only "passing" as such because she imaginarily fixes her self elsewhere. "I may be sitting here at the Rose Terrace Nursing Home," the epigraph to the novel quotes her as saying, "but in my mind I'm over at the Whistle Stop Cafe having a plate of fried green tomatoes." To stabilize her identity in the 1980s, Ninny tells nostalgic stories about Whistle Stop, a paradise lost whose fullness she defines in terms of present lacks. Her nostalgic utopian stories specify an exchange that requires "blacks" to take up positions subordinate to "whites" in order to receive the aid they need to make it through the Depression. The omniscient narrator, however, presents anecdotes about Whistle Stop of which Ninny never tells Evelyn. These other anecdotes show how the exchange Ninny views as utopian was distopian for "blacks" such as Sipsey, Artis, and Clarissa.<sup>11</sup>

Most of Ninny's anecdotes are of neighbors helping neighbors make it through the Depression. She tells Evelyn how Momma and Poppa Threadgoode raised her as if she were one of their own; how Poppa lost his store because he "couldn't say no to anybody,

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<sup>11</sup>In the future, I will use the terms "black" and "white" without scare quotes, but the reader should continue to see these words as problematic, as juridico-historical constructions upheld through violence.

white or colored" (26); how Big George watched over Idgie when she ran away from home; how Idgie and Ruth housed and fed the hoboes, such as Smokey Lonesome; and how both blacks and whites got along. Ninny sees this culture of exchange as utopian, telling Evelyn, "'It's odd, here the whole world was suffering so, but at the cafe, those Depression years come back to me now as the happy times, even though we were all struggling. We were happy and didn't know it'" (248). When Ninny recalls these memories, however, she is not "at the cafe" as she suggests in her phrasing, but at the nursing home. The dangling modifier in the quotation highlights Ninny's retrospective construction of the Depression. Ninny, therefore, exchanges anecdotes not only with Evelyn, but also with her Depression-era self who "didn't know" at the time how happy she was. With such an exchange, she attempts to fix a self disrupted by changes since the Depression by "remembering" herself as happy at the Whistle Stop Cafe.

But Ninny's anecdotes of this "utopia," require blacks to take up positions of the protectors and nurses of whites in order to get the aid they need to make it through the Depression. For example, Ninny tells Evelyn of the time when Ruth, ready to leave her abusive husband, had sent a coded message to Idgie. Puzzled, Idgie had handed the message to Momma, who said, "'I think tomorrow you and your brothers and Big George better go over there and get that girl, don't you? You know you're not going to be fit to live with till you do'" (191). Ninny's anecdote stops at this point, providing a perfect example of the support and understanding her utopian Whistle Stop provides for each of its members: Momma knows how much Idgie loves Ruth, and Idgie's brothers and Big George aid in Ruth's escape. In the next chapter, however, the omniscient narrator presents more of the story. When Ruth's husband, Frank Bennett, attempts to stop Ruth from leaving, Big George takes out a knife and cores an apple, all the while staring at Bennett. One member of the party even tells Bennett, "'I wouldn't get that nigger mad, mister. He's crazy!'" (197). The meaning is not lost on Bennett, and Big George's brave

act enables the escape to proceed successfully. But by taking up the position of Ruth's protector, by threatening a white man with a knife, Big George runs the risk of being lynched. Ninny's story omits the distopian effects many people faced while engaging in the exchange of "neighbors" helping "neighbors."

For those blacks who are no longer willing to engage in the exchange of "neighbors" helping "neighbors," Ninny proposes quieting them down. She complains that blacks are no longer as sweet as "Amos and Andy" or Big George. "'It's not just TV,'" she tells Evelyn. "'Mrs. Otis was over at the supermarket one day and she told this little colored boy that was passing by that she would give him a nickel if he'd lift her groceries in her car for her, and she said that he cut his eyes at her, mean-like, and just walked away'" (249). She then tells Evelyn, "'They ought to give those boys some tranquilizers and quiet them down for a while'" (249). Ninny also tranquilizes herself by refusing to listen to "bad news": "'I think all the bad news affects people, makes them so mean. So whenever the news comes on, I just cut it off'" (249).<sup>12</sup> Instead of watching the news, she turns on the Religious Right's programming—the P.T.L Club and the Seven Hundred Club. By including Ninny's complaints in the 1980s alongside omnisciently narrated chapters that present a more diverse—and certainly less utopian—account of Whistle Stop, the novel suggests that Ninny's views of the past are nostalgic white fantasies

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<sup>12</sup>The news media is a central concern in Flagg's most recent novel, *Welcome to the World, Baby Girl!* Here, in the late 1970s, the news does not make its viewers mean, as Ninny contends, but demands that those in the news media be mean in order to succeed. The novel's central character, Dena Nordstrom, one of the first women in television-news broadcasting, fights against what is portrayed as a new trend in journalism. The book presents an alternative by invoking an earlier woman journalist, Neighbor Dorothy, who conducts a radio show out of her home in the small town of Elmwood Springs, Missouri, in the late 1940s. In the mid-1980s, Dena buys what used to be Neighbor Dorothy's home and revives the radio show, where the "news was mostly good" (396). Unlike *Fried Green Tomatoes*, *Welcome to the World* does not use conflicting storytellers. Instead, like Ninny, the omniscient narrator contrasts the bad new days with the good old ones by submerging the disutopian conditions faced by Dena's family (and others) in the first-half of the twentieth-century.

constructed to fulfill present lacks and that such nostalgia leads all too easily to denial and to the conservative solutions of the Religious Right.

In addition to Big George, Ninny praises two other black characters for taking up the roles she sees as proper: Sipsey and Onzell. Both serve as cooks at the Whistle Stop Cafe, and both serve as nurses and protectors of Idgie, Ruth, and their son, Stump. However, the omniscient narrator relates a comment made by Sipsey, which makes it clear blacks run greater risks when they take up these roles. When Idgie undermines the Sheriff's order and sells food out the back door to black railroad workers, Sipsey mumbles under her breath, "'You gonna get yourself in a whole lot of trouble wid them Ku Kluxes, and I'm gonna be gone. You ain't gwine see me aroun' no more, no ma'am'" (53). This addition to Ninny's anecdote shows Ninny's nostalgic anecdotes produce Idgie as a charismatic individual and Whistle Stop as a communal small town by creating representations that require blacks to take up positions in racist hierarchies of benefits and risks.

If Sipsey's comment reveals the price to be paid by blacks who had to engage in "neighborly" exchange, then the omniscient narrator's anecdotes of Artis and Clarissa show what happened to blacks who left the exchange. Ninny portrays as utopian in favor of pursuing individual happiness. Artis leaves Whistle Stop for Slagtown, "Birmingham's own Harlem of the South" (118), where he plunges into the nightlife with other urban blacks. His escapades, reported by both the omniscient narrator and the *Slagtown News*'s gossip columnist, are anecdotes of divisions among blacks. He is constantly chased by jilted women and jealous husbands. Even when he attempts to help his neighbor, After John, by saving his dog from the dogcatcher, he is arrested. Importantly, the dogcatchers, whom he addresses as "sir," are raced as black. This is telling because Artis's action exacerbates tensions among blacks rather than working against the structures that produced such tensions in the first place. All of his actions result in this problem. Looked down upon for being so black that he had blue gums, he had stabbed his lighter-skinned brother in

the arm. When his other brother punched and was later killed by another black soldier, Artis killed this soldier rather than do something about the Army's indifference to fighting in the black ranks. The ending of Artis's story highlights the ineffectiveness of his actions, as he ends up alone in a boarding-house lobby, laughing to himself and urinating on the floor.

While Artis plunges into and fixates on blackness as an escape from Whistle Stop's "neighborly" exchanges, Clarissa "passes" as a white woman to advance her own individualist agenda. The text implies that the punctual, individualized gains of the black middle-class, of which Clarissa is a member, often come with attachments to "Saxon" racism. Clarissa's mother is the "president of the famous Royal Saxon Society Belles Social and Saving Club, an organization whose members were of such fair coloring that the club's annual group picture had wound up in the white newspaper by mistake" (295). Likewise, Clarissa attempts to solidify a black middle-class identity that depends upon and supports racist categories when she "passes" to buy White Shoulders perfume, a commodity championing whiteness. The effects of this individualist act become clear when Clarissa's Uncle Artis sees her at the store's counter. Failing to recognize his niece is "passing," Artis reminds her of their kinship. Finding herself haunted by ties she wants to repress, she stands in terror-struck silence and allows the white salesperson to call a security guard. Her "pass" dupes the salesperson, but leaves out Artis, who wonders whether he has really seen his niece and fails to connect with her in future encounters.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>13</sup>The terms I am using here come from Robinson's "It Takes One to Know One," which argues that the "pass" is often represented as structured by three participants—the passer, the dupe (whom the passer is attempting to pass by without being detected as passing), and the in-group clairvoyant (a member of the group from which the passer has just passed). The pass, she concludes, emerges as "a hostile encounter between two ways of reading, . . . offering[ing] competing rules of recognition in the place of discrete essences or 'natural' identities" (716). Compare the exchange I discuss between Clarissa and Artis to the dynamic triangular encounter in Fauset's *Plum Bun*, which Robinson analyzes (724). There, in the presence of a dupe, the passer uses an inside joke to display in-group recognition to the other member of the in-group, making that person an "in-group

Clarissa's "pass," therefore, fails to work in any other way than as the act of a charismatic individual advancing her own happiness and, in the process, stabilizing positions by fixing them in inequality, a solution quite similar to Ninny's.<sup>14</sup>

Other accounts of black characters, then, reveal that Ninny's Whistle Stop is not utopian for blacks and that championing Idgie as the charismatic individual ignores how blacks sacrificed for and were effected by Idgie's actions. Furthermore, these other accounts show the problems with the flipside of Ninny's Whistle Stop, the ineffectiveness of those who could not or would not fit into her idealized exchange of neighbors helping neighbors. Both sides of Whistle Stop—Ninny's ideal, on the one hand, and Artis's and Clarissa's flights from it, on the other—depend upon fixed identity categories; even Clarissa's "passing" champions whiteness by attempting to solidify connections to whites while severing connections to blacks. Still other accounts of Whistle Stop offer resistances or alternatives to these two sides by showing how Idgie, in cooperation with others, offers a different kind of exchange than Ninny's, a different kind of nightlife than Artis's, and a different kind of "passing" than Clarissa's. As a child, Stump (Ruth and Idgie's son) had believed Artis was Railroad Bill, the elusive black man who rode government-supply trains to throw food to blacks in Troutville. That Railroad Bill turns out to be Idgie suggests a connection between her story and Artis's. If Artis's anger results in ineffective acts, then the anecdote of Idgie as Railroad Bill seems to rework his initiatives. Similarly, Idgie's "passing" as a black man revises Clarissa's "passing" as a white woman, so much so that it is difficult to say who the real Idgie is. Ninny's nostalgic utopian stories produce Idgie as a charismatic individual populist by depending on a representation of neighbors helping

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clairvoyant," who then collaborates in duping the dupe. See also Chapter 4's discussion of Clare and Irene in Larsen's *Passing*.

<sup>14</sup>For discussions of "passes" that have different effects, see Robinson and my Chapter 4.

neighbors that requires blacks to take up certain positions in racist hierarchies. The stories related by the omniscient narrator, however, offer a different picture of Idgie by narrating how she works with black characters, such as Sipsey and Big George, to fight a power bloc that oppresses African-Americans, lesbians, and women in general.<sup>15</sup>

#### "Passing" and Anecdotes in the Depression-Era South

Jennifer Ross Church criticizes both the novel and the movie versions of *Fried Green Tomatoes* for decontextualizing the lives of both lesbian and black characters. She writes, "Lesbians, and strong women in general, often face disapproval and challenges that force them to define themselves in opposition to the conventional structure. But here Idgie's mother tries to get [her daughter and Ruth] together, and her father finances their cafe."<sup>16</sup> If Idgie's homelife seems idealistic and far removed from the Depression-era South, that is because it is a fantasized utopian realization of 1960s activisms. Not only do Idgie's parents and siblings accept her romantic feelings for Ruth, but her father's business practices are free from both racism and a drive for profits. Idgie is the result of such a utopian homelife and community. She too creates a family that includes the blacks who work at the cafe, the hobo Smokey Lonesome, and perhaps all the regular patrons of the cafe. Like her father, she too works to keep her business free from racism and is willing to give away food and shelter to those who need it. The product of this utopian homelife and community, Idgie attempts to change those who have not adopted 1960s ideals: Ruth, who is afraid of her feelings for Idgie; the Reverend Scroggins, who rails against alcohol and promiscuous sexuality; the Georgia attorney, who plays upon racist and homophobic prejudices; the Klan, which attempts to terrorize businesses into upholding Jim Crowism;

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<sup>15</sup>The term power bloc comes from Laclau and Mouffe, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*.

<sup>16</sup>Church, "The Balancing Act of *Fried Green Tomatoes*," 201.

and Stump, who feels that the loss of his arm makes him disabled. Rather than read Idgie's homelife and community in terms of our expectations for how the Depression era South should be portrayed or as an escape from the oppressions lesbians and blacks face, we need to read the omnisciently narrated stories of Whistle Stop as a counter to Reagan's portrayal of that era as a 1950s that can easily become the 1980s once people join his reform movement. These stories route their representations of the Depression-era through the 1960s to inspire activism against the power bloc Reagan was mobilizing.

The power bloc Idgie and her cohorts face has been well described by Angela Davis, who has shown how capitalism, racism, and sexism reinforce one another.<sup>17</sup> *Fried Green Tomatoes* represents both the equivalences Davis's work articulates and her drive to create new narratives for social action.<sup>18</sup> Ruth's husband, Frank Bennett, is a member of the KKK that lynches black men, a capitalist who rapes the black women who work for him, a misogynist who hates the impoverished white women with whom he has had sex, and an abusive husband who rapes and beats his wife. Bennett, therefore, represents the threats the dominant power bloc poses to black men, workers, and black and white women. The novel expands upon Davis's articulation of this equivalence by showing the mutually reinforcing oppressions faced by black men and white lesbian women. Dominant culture portrays both black men and white (particularly "butch") lesbians as those who rape and steal white women. Degeneration theory also portrayed blacks and lesbians as similar. As Judith Raiskin notes, "[o]nce science had constructed an elaborate model of racial hierarchies positing 'Caucasian' as the superior and 'Negro' as the inferior races, nineteenth-century studies of sexual and gender differences found this template of racial

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<sup>17</sup>See Davis, *Women, Race, and Class*, 172-201.

<sup>18</sup>The term equivalence comes from Laclau and Mouffe, *Hegemony and Socialist Practice*.

inequalities . . . remarkably helpful in explaining, or rather asserting, gender and class inequalities as well."<sup>19</sup> Degenerationist taxonomies added to this group other "ethical degenerates," including inebrates, paupers, prostitutes, criminals, and vagrants. Such a grouping suggests how hobos, such as Smokey Lonesome, and "loose women," such as Eva Bates, face oppressions that reinforce and are reinforced by those Big George, Idgie, and Ruth face and thus suggests why they all join forces in the Dill Pickle Club and at the trial for Bennett's murder.

At that trial, the prosecution charges Idgie with having "'broke[n] up the most sacred thing on this earth — a Christian home with a loving father and mother and child . . . [and having] defiled the sacred and holy marriage between a man and woman'" by "'bribing this poor weak woman [Ruth] with promises of money and liquor'" (340). The attorney then calls Idgie's co-defendant, Big George, a "'known . . . worthless, no-good lying nigger'" (341). Idgie replies to this joint heterosexist, male-supremacist, and racist attack by calling the attorney a "'gump-faced, blowed-up, baboon-assed bastard'" (341). Just as Huck was willing to sacrifice his eternal soul to help Jim escape from slavery, Idgie refuses to sacrifice Big George to spare her own life. Not to refuse such an escape would be to lend support to those mutually reinforcing discourses and institutions that produce men like Bennett.

Because the omniscient narrator's stories articulate an equivalence between the oppressions of white lesbians and black men, one can read Big George helping Idgie free Ruth differently than Ninny does. Instead of seeing his aid as the exchange between blacks and whites Ninny portrays as utopian, one can see it as Big George aiding those who want to enter social roles opposed by a dominant culture that also oppresses him. When Big George brandishes his knife at Bennett to help Ruth escape, not only can one see a black

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<sup>19</sup>Raiskin, "Inverts and Hybrids," 157.

man taking up the role of protector and enabler of white social roles, but one can also see an oppressed person helping other people who face oppressions that nourish and are nourished by those he faces. The omniscient narrator's stories, therefore, provide ways of re-narrating the relationships between blacks and whites in the Depression-era South, ways that counter Ninny's stories.

Idgie and her cohorts come together in collective response to these mutually reinforcing oppressions by resisting a racist and heterosexist form of "justice." Sipsey kills Bennett to keep him from taking baby Stump away from Ruth and Idgie. Big George covers up the murder, an act that shows their willingness to stand by another black person against racist forms of justice. In turn, Idgie stands by Big George when he is accused of the murder, since the racist form of justice that would quickly hang a black man accused of killing a white man is the same justice that assumes a white woman who leaves her husband for a white butch lesbian must have been bribed with alcohol. Finally hobos—who often face a dominant power bloc that presumes their guilt, as when the American Legion violently drives Smokey Lonesome and others out of a Chicago park—run the risk of being found in contempt to offer Idgie and Big George alibis. Unlike Ninny's nostalgic utopia, which requires blacks to take up subordinate positions in the exchange of "neighbors" helping "neighbors," these acts show oppressed people helping others oppressed by social structures that nourish and are nourished by the social structures that also oppress the helpers.

The novel also articulates these equivalent oppressions faced by black men and white (butch) lesbians in Idgie's portrayal of her love for Ruth. Idgie is first represented as "passing" for black when she shows Ruth how she can charm bees. Arranging for a romantic picnic for two, Idgie takes Ruth by the hand to a special spot she found years ago and shows her a secret. While humming, she puts her arm into an oak tree full of bees.

In seconds, Idgie was covered from head to foot with thousands of bees. Idgie just stood there, and in a minute, carefully pulled her hand out of the tree and started walking slowly back toward Ruth, still humming. By the time she had gotten back, almost all the bees had flown away and what had been a completely black figure was now *Idgie*, standing there, grinning from ear to ear, with a jar of wild honey. (85, emphasis mine)

Three important and recurring narrative elements appear as linked when Idgie suggestively offers Ruth her "honey pot": "passing" for black, providing food for others, and making a seductive pass (often a charming smile) at a desired other.<sup>20</sup>

That Idgie seduces her lover with a jar of honey is significant. Not only does the act play upon the phrase used as a metaphor for sexually aroused female genitalia — "honey pot" — but it also employs a sweetener that does not carry with it the history of slavery and exploitative labor conditions the way sugar does.<sup>21</sup> Many items Evelyn brings as presents for Ninny are full of sugar or, as with the salty snacks she brings her, consumed with sugary beverages such as sweet-tea and Coca-Cola. Evelyn's dependence on sugar fits well with her individualized solution to feelings of rage, depression, and alienation, as that solution reiterates a politics of individual happiness and denies that many, including U.S. blacks, are being kept from tasting the sweetness of capitalism's promises. Idgie, however, brings her lover honey from a wild hive, a product that is not produced by exploited human labor but that is a by-product of the reproduction of plants by insect

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<sup>20</sup>Because of the structure of the lesbian relationship I argue for here, I disagree with Church's contention that "the novel leaves the nature of their lesbian identity largely undefined" (Church, "The Balancing Act of *Fried Green Tomatoes*, 198).

<sup>21</sup>See Mintz, *Sweetness and Power*, for a discussion of the history and politics of sugar.

pollination. Honey, therefore, works well as a symbol for a love that attempts to intervene in oppressive social structures.<sup>22</sup>

The structure of this articulation of lesbian love—"passing" for black, providing food for others, and making a seductive pass (often a charming smile)—recurs throughout the novel. For example, Idgie uses the debate over to whom she should provide food as an opportunity not only to stand up to racists, but also to present her love to Ruth in terms of feeding blacks, changing people's attitudes, and fighting inequality. Idgie wants blacks to be able to eat alongside whites in her cafe. Knowing she cannot do so in the Jim Crow South, she decides to sell food to black patrons out the back door. But this compromise still gets her in trouble with Sheriff Grady and the Klan. While talking over the problem with Ruth, Idgie gives her a charming smile. As when Idgie appeared to Ruth as the Bee Charmer, Idgie's smile seems to change Ruth and to lead to social action, as they decide to make everything sold out the back door a nickel or dime cheaper, feeling blacks should not be charged for the table service they cannot enjoy. By posting the list of reduced prices, Idgie and Ruth make visible the inequalities in which they are forced to participate. The controversy over feeding black patrons thus becomes an opportunity for representing love between women in such a way that links daring to engage in a lesbian relationship to daring to challenge—in however compromised a way—the segregation of blacks and whites.

During this discussion, Idgie presents Ruth with an anecdote that suggests the possibility of changing people's minds about segregation. Before flashing her smile, Idgie tells Ruth a secret about Grady: "'Ruth, I wish you could have seen that big ox, down at the river for three days, drunk as a dog, crying like a baby, 'cause Joe, that old colored

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<sup>22</sup>For an overview of the importance of cooking in Southern culture and in novels by Southern women, see Dvorak, "Cooking as Mission and Ministry in Southern Culture." Dvorak fails to distinguish between the different types of cooking and food served in *Fried Green Tomatoes at the Whistle Stop Cafe* and therefore sees Evelyn feeding Nannie as being similar to Idgie and Ruth feeding hobos and blacks.

man that raised him, died'" (55). Idgie reveals this secret because she is exasperated by people's inconsistencies. "'They're terrified to sit next to a nigger and have a meal,'" she complains, "'but they'll eat eggs that came right out of a chicken's ass'" (55). Ruth agrees, but is concerned over Idgie getting so upset. "'That's just the way people are,'" Ruth says, "'and there's not a thing in the world you can do to change them'" (55). Ruth's conclusion brings forth Idgie's smile. Later, the reader learns Grady is not as recalcitrant as Ruth thinks he is. Grady is also "passer"—a member of the Klan and the detective of the railroad, who nevertheless aids Idgie's "passing" as Railroad Bill. If this member of the Klan can fight a system that ignores the conditions faced by blacks during the Depression, others can as well. The smile Idgie flashes at Ruth in response to the latter's surrender, then, seems to signify the potential of secret inconsistencies such as Grady's, which can be sites for change because they can lead to other secret and inconsistent acts.

However, secrets and inconsistencies do not automatically or permanently lead to change. In another scene that interarticulates lesbian love and "passing," the omniscient narrator, by citing a 1980s conversation between Stump and his granddaughter's boyfriend, provides the reader with the story of Railroad Bill that Ninny (and thus Evelyn) does not know. Stump tells of how one morning, near daybreak, he went to the toilet and found Ruth and Idgie there:

"Momma looked at me, surprised, and said, 'Wait a minute, honey,' and closed the door.

"I said, 'Hurry up, Momma, I cain't wait!' . . . I heard them talking and pretty soon they came out, and Aunt Idgie was drying her hands and face. When I got in there, the sink was still full of coal dust. And on the floor, behind the door, was a black stocking hat [like the one Railroad Bill was reputed to wear]." (332)

This scene gestures both to a boy stumbling upon his parents having sex in the middle of the night and to the moment of coming out of "passing," the movement from "what had been a completely black figure" to Idgie. Stump keeps the secret long enough to allow Railroad Bill's aid and Idgie and Ruth's relationship to continue; therefore, he too

participates in this interarticulation of lesbian love and cross-racial social activism. But Stump no longer occupies this position in the 1980s. When he does tell the anecdote, in 1986, he does so in a way that, much like Ninny, uses nostalgia to settle identities upset by earlier identifications. In particular, he tells the story as a tale of the charismatic individualized populist working for those "worthy" of aid. He precedes the story by saying hobos are now "'[j]ust bums and dope addicts that will steal you blind'" (330). Stump implies Railroad Bill's aid and the identifications his family formed during the Depression would be inappropriate nowadays. Like Reagan, Stump portrays the past as a paradise lost to argue against welfare, desegregation, and social activism in the 1980s.

As with the scene Stump witnesses, Idgie's stories disrupt by showing people that they do not know what they think they know, that if "to see is to know," then sight is a site where knowledge can always be revised by new visions leading to new narratives—and vice versa. Stump sees coal-dust in the sink and a black stocking hat behind the door and revises his narrative of Railroad Bill. Idgie shows Stump, who has lost his arm in a railroad accident, how well a three-legged dog can catch a ball, and Stump revises his narrative of never being able to compete with the other children. In effect, Idgie changes people by presenting them with opportunities to revise their stories by recognizing the similarities between their own narrative positions and those of others.

Idgie not only presents people with these opportunities to revise their stories, but also institutionalizes such storytelling by founding the Dill Pickle Club, a group that brings together a plurality of people from various social fields. Besides Idgie and Sheriff Grady, the club includes Sipsey, the black woman who cooks at the cafe; Eva Bates, the "loose" woman who lives down by the river; the hobo Smokey Lonesome; and various other white men, a number of whom are in the Klan. The club's main purpose is exchanging anecdotes, or as Ninny dismissively puts it, "'mak[ing] up lies'" (124). By using the cafe as a site for the Dill Pickle Club to meet, Idgie and others create, through the distribution

and eating of food, a space that gestures towards a counterculture. Bringing together subjects from a plurality of social fields to tell stories, the club creates opportunities to destabilize identities fixed in inequality by presenting each other with alternate narratives and narrative positions.

If The Dill Pickle Club engages in social activism by exchanging anecdotes, then so too does *Fried Green Tomatoes*. In effect, the omniscient narrator offers tall tales: the Bee Charmer, the three-legged dog, the one-armed marksman, and Railroad Bill. Like Idgie, the novel presents anecdotes and scenes that provide readers with opportunities to revise their narrative positions by seeing an equivalence between themselves and oppressed others, a revision that can result in collective acts. The novel counters Reagan's and Ninny's use of nostalgic anecdotes by refusing to restabilize identities in a paradise lost. Instead, the novel emphasizes identities are contingent and stories of the past are either imaginative representations or limited accounts. The omniscient narrator presents tall tales. Dot Weems and the *Slagtown News* write gossip columns, and even the elite newspaper, the *Birmingham News*, offers a slanted account, referring to Idgie as Stump's aunt (261) while the local *Weems Weekly* calls her one of Stump's parents (268). In this novel, anecdotes are not accurate remembrances of the past, but exchanges of cultural capital. Emphasizing the exchange value of anecdotes, titles of chapters sometimes present a pun on the ending of the previous chapter. After one chapter relates how Idgie took Stump to Eva Bates for his first sexual encounter, the next chapter's title announces "Stump Threadgoode Makes Good," which turns out to be a story of how the *Birmingham News* praised Stump's football game (207-8). Another chapter shows Evelyn concluding about gender inequities, "All that mattered in this world was the fact that you *had balls*" (277), only to be followed by a chapter titled "Benefit for New Balls," which turns out to be about how the Dill Pickle Club raised money for the high school's new basketballs (278). The novel continually surprises the reader's expectations, which not only makes the book

funny, but also shows how the exchange of anecdotes can be used not only for oppressive purposes, as is the case with Reagan and Ninny, but also for revisionist purposes, as is the case with Idgie.

#### The 1980s' (Ab)use of Anecdotes

While the omnisciently narrated chapters about Idgie provide gestures toward a collective movement of blacks, whites, and hobos, the omnisciently narrated chapters about Evelyn show the foreclosure of these gestures in the 1980s. Evelyn parallels Idgie in several ways, thus allowing the reader to compare the two. Just as Idgie presents Ruth with a jar of honey, Evelyn continually presents sweets to Ninny. Just as Idgie "passes" for black to right wrongs, Evelyn imagines she is secretly Towanda the Avenger, a name which shows she identifies radical social action with blackness. Evelyn never hears of either Idgie's beecharming or her "passing" for Railroad Bill, however, because the story of Whistle Stop is told to her by the nostalgically conservative Ninny. By showing that Evelyn never hears about Idgie engaging in these acts, the text implies there is a discontinuity between Evelyn and Idgie. While Idgie's acts create gestures toward a collective response to oppression, one that involves both blacks and whites, as well as others that dominant culture groups with them and members from dominant culture itself, Evelyn's acts result in a politics of individual happiness, a championing of individuals "making it through," a resegregation of blacks, and a reiteration of the Reaganite myth of good times. The differences between Idgie and Evelyn, therefore, most clearly exemplify the politics of the exchange of anecdotes.

Feeling "the world had become a different place, a place she didn't know at all" (40), Evelyn represents the kind of voter most susceptible to Reagan's anecdotes of paradise lost. Just as many voters, whose identities had been disrupted by change, listened to Reagan's message about going "back to the future," Evelyn listens to Ninny's nostalgic

stories while "wonder[ing] where her group was, the place where she fit in" (42). Because nostalgia refers to a "something else" that fills present lacks and locates a stable identity in the past, Ninny's stories complement Evelyn's demands.<sup>23</sup> Like Ninny, whose nostalgic utopia depends on segregation, Evelyn nostalgically looks back to her high-school days when "[t]here were the good girls and the bad girls, and everyone knew who was who," when "Evelyn had been in the golden circle" (41). The developments since the fifties, however, have disrupted Evelyn's high-school worldview too much for it to be the "something else" that can stabilize her identity in the eighties. Since this nostalgic view is foreclosed to Evelyn, she will reproduce it through a circuitous route that will update the fifties for the eighties.

Just as Reagan's anecdotes helped voters think they were going back to the future, Ninny's nostalgic stories of the Depression-era South provide this circuitous route for Evelyn. Evelyn is suicidal, feeling completely lost, with no position from which to continue living. To get out of "that dark pit of her own personal hell," she forces herself to hear Ninny's voice and to imagine herself in Whistle Stop, sitting in the cafe:

She would order lunch and Wilbur Weems and Grady Kilgore would wave to her. Sipsey and Onzell would smile at her and she could hear the radio from the kitchen. Everyone would ask her how she was and the sun was always shining and there would always be a tomorrow . . . Lately she slept more and more and thought of the gun less and less . . . (133-4, ellipses in original)

Ninny's stories provide Evelyn with a position that imaginarily stabilizes her identity, a place where people she recognizes recognize her. Whistle Stop becomes for her "more of a reality than her own life with Ed in Birmingham" (134), but it does not yet give her a way of interacting in the social world; instead, she spends more and more time sleeping. Evelyn's nostalgic return to Whistle Stop, therefore, parallels Ninny's return in that each

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<sup>23</sup>See Rohy, "Displacing Desire."

finds a utopia that fills lack and fixes positions in a comfortable exchange of recognition, but also one that prevents an engagement with the social world.

The shutdown that happens with this going "back to the future" implies one needs to feel lack in order to desire and one needs to desire in order to act. Unhappiness, therefore, is necessary for movement in the social realm, and Ninny's solutions are ineffective because they are based on the assumption that one needs to achieve individual happiness and tranquility. Retrospective fulfillment of lack and fixation of position stop movement; one becomes a bit of nostalgia oneself, a snapshot fixed and unable to develop further. Whistle Stop, as a nostalgic utopia for Ninny and Evelyn, becomes the perfect symbol for this fixation. With the increased use of automobiles and the decreased use of trains, Whistle Stop had closed down. Since this "utopia" was created by the type of transportation that is now long-gone, Whistle Stop cannot be anticipated because it can no longer be actualized. Interestingly, the two solutions Evelyn tries are both symbolized by cars, the very objects that ended Whistle Stop: Towanda's car, which smashes the car of two teenagers who take her parking space, and the Mary Kay Cosmetics Pink Cadillac.<sup>24</sup>

One of Evelyn's solutions is to get angry, and her anger leads her to imagine herself as Towanda the Avenger. She links this solution to Idgie. After being called names and pushed by a man in the supermarket parking lot, Evelyn wishes Idgie had been with her. "She would not have let that boy call *her* names," Evelyn thinks. "I'll bet she would have knocked *him* down" (237). Like Idgie, Evelyn creates for herself a secret identity in which she is, or "passes," for black. Unlike Idgie's secret identity, Evelyn's does not lead to action within the social realm; instead, she carries out her social actions only in fantasy—

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<sup>24</sup>For another discussion of the importance of automobiles in the nostalgic anecdotes of the Reagan era, see Wills's discussion of the movie *Back to the Future (Reagan's America)*, 340-88), where the car-as-time-machine works as a tool to "adapt[ ] modern life back toward inherited ideals" (372-3). See also Cannon, *President Reagan*, and Nadel, *Flatlining on the Field of Dreams* for a discussion of this movie's importance in the Reagan era.

that is until she rams her car into two teenagers who call her old and slow. After this act, she worries "Towanda was taking over her life, and somewhere, deep down, a tiny alarm bell sounded and she knew she was in sure danger of going over the edge and never coming back" (291). Evelyn also says the only time she does not feel so angry is while listening to Ninny talk about Whistle Stop. The two times, however, yield similar results: both lead to a removal from the social realm, either through a movement toward the edge or an ever-increasing amount of sleep.

Besides suggesting Evelyn take tranquilizers, Ninny advises her to try selling Mary Kay Cosmetics and winning the Pink Cadillac.<sup>25</sup> Ninny's advice does provide anticipation; Evelyn "begins to see herself as thin and happy— behind the wheel of a pink Cadillac" (359). The advice also enables Evelyn to act. But Ninny's advice returns Evelyn to a very problematic political place: a 1950s updated for the 1980s. Evelyn takes Ninny's advice, wins the Pink Cadillac, and drives it out to the cemetery on the first anniversary of her friend's death. Two symbols signify the path Evelyn has taken.

First, the Pink Cadillac represents not only individual success and happiness as a solution to feelings of alienation and depression, but also the nostalgia she uses to fix identity. The Pink Cadillac is an object updated for the eighties since it is a sign of one's yuppie-like role in the business world. It is also a bit of nostalgia, a symbol of the fifties Evelyn remembers fondly. For Evelyn, the fifties were the times when she forgot black people and their material conditions:

When she was little, she would sometimes go with her father when he would drive their [black] maid to the south side, where she lived. It was just ten minutes away, but seemed to her like going to another country: the music, the clothes, the houses . . . everything was different. . . . But as Evelyn got a little older, she didn't go to the south side anymore and thought little about them; she had been too busy with her own life. (308, first ellipsis in original, second ellipsis mine)

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<sup>25</sup>The Mary Kay cosmetics company offered a free make-over and cosmetics with the purchase of a used video of *Fried Green Tomatoes*. See Berman, "Mary Kay Cosmetics Joins 'Tomatoes' Promotion Team."

Evelyn looks back at her relation to blacks critically, but this criticism leads nowhere. Like the Pink Cadillac, her relation to blacks also gets updated for the eighties. Going to a black church, she comes away feeling that black people have made it through the tough times and that blacks and whites can now live (or return to living) segregated lives:

She was free. *Free*; just like these people here today, who had come through all that suffering and had not let hate and fear kill their spirit of love. . . . Maybe she had come today hoping she could find out what it was like to be black. Now she realized she could never know, any more than her friends here could know what it felt like to be white. She knew she would never come back. This was their place. (313)

By representing Evelyn as calling those she has just met her "friends," the text signifies that Evelyn's conversion is rather absurd and thus not a sentiment it endorses. Evelyn draws inspiration from the upper-middle-class blacks whom she has met at this church and takes to heart their very upper-middle-class sermon about giving up anger (and thus Towanda); she finds the courage to take Ninny's advice and seek the Pink Cadillac. While this vision of race relations has been updated for the eighties, it still ignores the material conditions of blacks who do not enjoy the privileges those at the church do. The Pink Cadillac at the end of the story, therefore, represents Evelyn's nostalgic "return" to a 1980s-style fifties that has the same problems now as it did then: an individual happiness and success purchased at the price of ignoring the material conditions of blacks.

The second reminder of the path Evelyn has taken is "her fourteen-karat studded bumblebee pin with emerald eyes, another award" (387). At first glance, this pin seems to symbolize an affiliation between Idgie and Evelyn: both are covered with bees. But again, there are telling differences between Idgie and Evelyn that show the eighties' abuse of Idgie's gestures toward collective resistance. Evelyn's fourteen-karat studded pin represents individual success in terms of the accumulation of awards given for increasing a company's profit; Idgie's business had been about making a living for herself, Ruth, and Stump while providing a space for aid and care among members of Whistle Stop, for the

Dill Pickle Club's exchange of anecdotes, and for the headquarters of Railroad Bill. Evelyn's bee is more closely associated with Ninny's bumblebee than with Idgie's honeybees. "'One time,'" Ninny begins, "'Cleo caught a bumblebee and put it in the jar for us, and [it] was a precious thing to look at'" (180). Ninny's staring at the bumblebee is similar to her watching the 700 Club or watching the trains go by: these activities present her with hours of diversion from social problems. Just as Evelyn misses Idgie at the gravesite, her response to social problems misses Idgie's response. "*The Bee Charmer*" becomes in the eighties a bit of nostalgia whose story gets used and discarded to create a politics of individual success and happiness and remains only as a souvenir of where the charismatic individual, Evelyn, has been.

The solutions taken most seriously by the novel are those offered by Idgie and her cohorts: Idgie and Ruth's joint decision to sell to black customers out the cafe's back door and to lower prices tellingly, the food purloined from government supply trains by Railroad Bill and his accomplices, and the exchanges of anecdotes that create opportunities to destabilize identities fixed in inequality by presenting people with alternate narratives and narrative positions. These solutions offer alternatives to the world Reagan and Ninny present, a world of charismatic individuals, private charity, and identities fixed in inequalities by going "back to the future." These solutions can still offer alternatives in a country where Reagan's popular strategy continues to inspire candidates from Bob Dole to Bill Clinton. By presenting alternate narratives and narrative positions than the ones people currently occupy and by inviting people to recognize possible connections between the oppressions they face and the oppressions faced by others, the exchange of anecdotes can unfix people from the disciplined identity positions they now inhabit and bring them together for group work that offers resistances to those oppressions. Such group work can take place in school classrooms, particularly in humanities and social science courses. It

can also take place outside the schools, in the kind of groups that are being increasingly formed around hobbies and self-fashioning.

The novel ends with such a hope, reserving the last chapter not for Evelyn at the gravesite, as the movie does, but for Idgie and a friend exchanging anecdotes with some vacationing travellers. Again Idgie is presented as "passing," first mistaken for an old man and then described as having "brown . . . skin" (393), an aged Railroad Bill. Just as she had presented a jar of honey to Ruth, who went on to join her in resisting and responding to oppressions, Idgie now presents a jar of honey to a young girl, suggesting that while the eighties have abused gestures of collective resistance, their possibilities may be actualized by future generations through such relationships.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>26</sup>Recently, Flagg has addressed the issue of "passing" more explicitly in *Welcome to the World, Baby Girl!* Whereas *Fried Green Tomatoes* champions those with destabilized identities and shows them coming together for activist projects, the latter novel champions a woman who finally discovers who she and her mother "really" are and becomes a Nanny-like storyteller, hosting a radio show in which "the news was mostly good" (396). The differences between the two novels suggest that, after the success of the movie version of *Fried Green Tomatoes*, Flagg has abandoned the politics of her earlier novel in favor of the Reaganite politics of the movie.

## CHAPTER 6 CONCLUSION

*Franklin Evans* shows how utopias always fail because something in the social field which cannot be sutured always remains. Dominant ideologies offer us "realities" or programs as ways of escaping our recognition of this remainder by marshalling the social field for reforming those figures, such as inebriates and "passers," who are seen as that which keeps the utopia from being actualized. As *Moby-Dick* shows, these programs, which it portrays as archeological digs for the deep universal meaning that can found subjects and society, are haunted by the phantoms resulting from the outrageousness of our utopian expectations. Chapters in *Moby-Dick*, especially "Loomings" and "Queequeg in His Coffin," take on the role of these phantoms by mocking such expectations and reminding us that living humans are forever barred from attaining that which could solidly found either subjects or societies.

But we are not mocked to death, and all four novels discussed here suggest ways of living with the recognition that subjects and societies are responses to lack. In *Franklin Evans*, the protagonist's drinking buddies, Mitchell and Colby, point to these failures of closure, not by identifying figures who are at fault, but by going backstage, that private realm the middle-class allowed itself to prepare for their roles in polite society. Mitchell and Colby, then, teach Evans to be skeptical of "reality," of an ideological field that captivates us with a utopian vision of a complete and ordered society. Evans's visit to the gorgeous theater with Colby and Mitchell suggests an alternative to temperance organizations, such as Washingtonianism and, later, A.A. Instead of bringing people together to convert through experience narratives their "false" selves into the pure gold molded

on the founding fathers' characters, why not bring them together to experiment with other ways of living with the radical inability of the ideological field ever to achieve its accomplished form?

*Moby-Dick* and, later, *The Confidence-Man* show how one can work to return those stuck to "real" selves by returning them to the play of unfounded and inconsistent selves, to the play of (and enjoyment in) confidence games. Once Ishmael rejects Emerson's archeological hunts and Ahab's paranoid view of Fate playing confidence games, he too engages in such play, inventing the self of Ishmael and getting us readers to play along and call him Ishmael as he mocks our Emersonian expectations as outlandish and reminds us we are forever barred from the completion that could solidly found a self or society.

*Passing* shows even more clearly how such work can respond to oppressive reforms. As Irene comes to feel torn between both identifying and disidentifying with Clare, encounters between the two friends problematize Irene's stubborn belief in safety and seduce her into joining in some of Clare's "risky" practices. Larsen's novel suggests that just as chapters of *Moby-Dick* mocked readers' Emersonian expectations to return them to playing and creating, friends (etc.) can push and pull each other out of fantasies of domestic safety and into experimental responses to what is dangerous now by drawing upon each other's multiple and contradictory identifications.

Finally, *Fried Green Tomatoes* suggests how such an ethical response to oppressive reforms can become a political response. The omniscient narrator's anecdotes show how Idgie and her friends create a space that gestures towards a counterculture. By bringing together subjects from a plurality of social fields to exchange anecdotes, The Dill Pickle Club creates opportunities to destabilize identities fixed in inequality by presenting each other with alternate narratives and narrative positions. These possibilities then lead to

collective acts of resistance without requiring people consistently to adopt certain identities, to take up certain positions of visibility in the public sphere's disciplinary gaze.

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#### BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

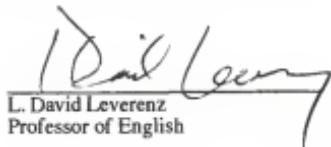
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I certify that I have read this study and that in my opinion it conforms to acceptable standards of scholarly presentation and is fully adequate, in scope and quality, as a dissertation for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy.



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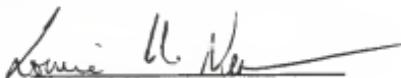
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